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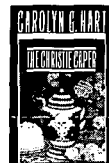
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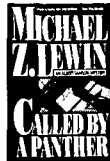
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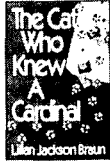
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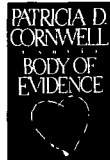
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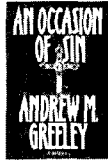
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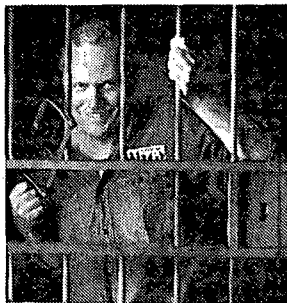
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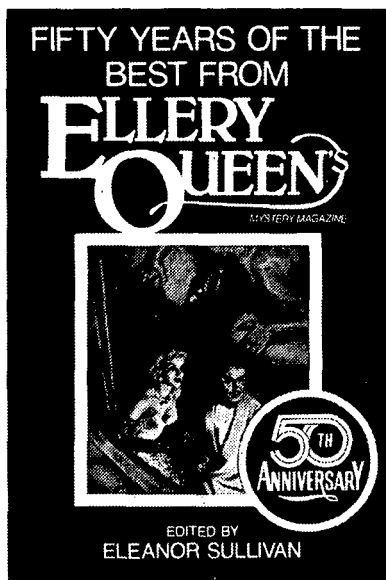
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With nervously fumbling fingers she put down the tiles. M—U—R. And now that D. And E—R.

Only then did she realise just what it was she had said. Or Scrabble had said for her. Really, it had been the thought that had been in her mind, or half in her mind, after that little spat about DIVORCE. The only alternative, MURDER.

Another ingenious invention by the author of the popular Inspector Ghote mystery novels . . .

SCRABBLE BABBLE DABBLE

by H. R. F. KEATING

Millie Prescott liked to win at Scrabble. Actually she hated the game. But Mike, who was very good at it, insisted on playing every evening they were at home. Even when they were round with people like the Schwartzes or Peter Remington and his sister he would often get up a foursome. So she felt that, as she was being made to play against her real wishes, she should at least be entitled to win.

And she knew a way of doing it. Something that didn't depend on cunning, things like never giving your opponent a chance to get along to a triple-word square. Or, when you were stuck with a hand chock-a-block with vowels, knowing to put a B or a W, if you were lucky enough to have either one, with an E after it alongside two letters in a word already there, so scoring three two-letter words.

Millie's secret was different. It was that you had to be careful always, when you dipped in the bag for new tiles, to put them into your rack from right to left in the exact order you took them out of

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your hand. If you did that, every time, no matter what, you would win. But you had to be absolutely tough with yourself. Even if, say, two tiles after you had been landed with the Q you found you had a U, you must never place them side by side until every other tile in your pick-up was in place.

If you kept to that for the whole of the game, and didn't once forget, you were bound to win. Or at least she was. It had always worked for her, every time she did it. She didn't know whether it would work for anyone else, and she was not going to try telling anybody, not even Rita Schwartz. Something like that had to be kept totally secret. And it was sensible not to use it every time.

So it had not much surprised her, that evening at home that began it all, when, deciding that this time she was darn well going to have a win, as she put her first pick-up into her rack in that right-to-left order they came out as E—C—R—O—V—I—D. Yes, she saw after a second, it was a Scrabble, a terrific beginning with as an extra the double points you got for starting. It just proved how you couldn't go wrong when you decided you were going to use the system.

But DIVORCE, she thought a moment later. It might be a bit tricky putting that out there on the board.

Mike might make some joke. Or no sort of a joke. Or expect her to say something herself. But what? What? She certainly couldn't think of any joke to make. Not about getting a divorce.

Her worst fears proved justified the instant she planked down the final E (just as she realised, too, that she had stupidly failed to put the V on a light-blue double-letter score square; Mike never let her move tiles after they had touched the board).

"Divorce," Mike said, not even commenting on the big score she was going to make. "You're not hoping for that, baby?"

He gave a grin that could not help coming over as twisted.

"Here's one husband who isn't going to let all the world know his wife's been bed-hopping."

"I haven't—"

She stopped herself. If there was one thing worse than an evening playing Scrabble, it was an evening rowing about whether or not she and Peter Remington "had something going."

But, luckily, at the last second she was rescued. A sudden gleam flicked into Mike's eyes, and he began snatching tiles from his rack. Down they went one by one under the O she had contrived to leave directly above the red triple-word score square at the foot of the board. V—E—R—D—O—S—E. One Scrabble to set against another,

and with the triple's terrific total. Maybe, after all, this was going to be the night her system failed to work.

A wash of misery flooded over her. What a life. Tied to a man she had long ago fallen out of step with. Nothing in her days really to hold her interest, just getting the house and garden the way Mike liked them. Mike and not herself. Plus occasionally going shopping with Rita Schwartz and once a month sitting on the charity committee Peter chaired. Then the evenings. Scrabble, Scrabble, Scrabble. And now, perhaps, not even getting to win tonight.

Dully she looked at the board in front of her. OVERDOSE. How different it all might be if Mike by mistake took an overdose of his damn heart medicine. Or, what about if she gave him one? She wouldn't do it, of course. But there didn't seem to be any other way she could ever get free. She hadn't needed this last blast of his about divorce to know here was one husband who would never consent to a parting of the ways. Never let her be her own woman again. Never.

In black depression she was on the point of putting the tiles she had taken from the bag into her rack from left to right. But she just managed to stop herself. Damn it, at least she would have the satisfaction of winning this game.

So, with care, she put in her seven new tiles.

Q—R—E—R—A

Thank goodness, she had been concentrating enough in the end not to have put the Q at the extreme left of her rack where, when she was not working the system, she always stashed it or the J or the X or the Z until she got a chance to put them on a dark blue square. Or, if she could ever work out how to do it, onto a simple double-letter score light blue square as part of a word that reached to a pink double-word space.

Hastily she put her last two letters in, conscious that Mike was glaring at her in the way he did if she was not playing as quickly as he liked. A U—Don't stick it beside the Q—and an M.

Now, hurry, she must find something to put down. In half a minute Mike would start that finger-drumming routine, and every thought would go flying out of her head.

She peered at her rack.

And saw it. Yes. Forget about the Q, even if she had the U, and there was a good word. Using the D of her DIVORCE. And it would give her a double-word score, too.

With nervously fumbling fingers she put down the tiles.

M—U—R. And now that D. And E—R.

Only then did she realise just what it was she had said. Or Scrabble had said it for her. Really, it had been the thought that had been in her mind, or half in her mind, after that little spat about DIVORCE. The only alternative, MURDER.

"No S," Mike said, liking as always to comment on her play, though he would jump down her throat if she dared say anything about his. "Pity you don't have an S. It would have got you two doubles. A solid forty points. Or, if you'd had a Q, you could have put that on a triple with QUEER, using the E in my OVERDOSE, and have scored yourself a nice thirty-six, exactly twice what you total now with MURDER."

She fought to keep the blush from rising up. Mike would see it at once and know that she did have the Q and had missed her chance. He could always catch her out like that.

How could she have failed to see it? An opportunity to get rid of her Q straight away, and one scoring all that much more. Now, if she knew anything, she would be stuck with the damn letter for the rest of the night. Or in the end be reduced to sticking it in front of the U of MURDER with just an A after and only score a total of twelve for QUA, one of Mike's favourite clever-clever words, whatever it meant.

But MURDER. The word had seemed to leap out at her in a way she had been unable to resist.

Like the idea.

She thrust the thought away.

And now, it seemed, Mike was in difficulties. He was moving his tiles about on his rack, this way and that, frowning and muttering.

She waited as patiently as she could while he made up his mind. Damn it, he must have at least one letter he could put down somewhere. Even if he had got stuck with no vowels, as sometimes happened to her on the nights she had decided not to risk overworking her system, there were opportunities in plenty on the board, BE or HE or WE or ME using the E of her MURDER. Or, better—how was it she never saw things like this when it was her turn?—if he had nothing more than an N he could at least score twice with that by tucking it into the corner of MURDER and DIVORCE, EN—something to do with printing, Mike always said—and IN. There must be other places to go, too, even if he had the most awkward bunch of consonants. But, no, fiddle, fiddle, fiddle. He would go on endlessly, hoping something would appear.

And if she were to drum her fingers, or look at her watch, even accidentally, what a storm of abuse would spew out at her.

At last Mike gave a grunt of disgust and planked down two letters, one on either side of the second O of OVERDOSE.

"LOW," he snapped. "I've reached a low point in my play, all right. Big score of eleven, with those two double-letter squares."

Well, at least he had put something down. And she was not going to point out to him that he was already so far ahead that getting a score of only eleven now was not the end of the world. However much he had been, in fact, angling for open recognition of how well he had begun.

She stared, hardly taking anything in, at the new lot of letters she had drawn. At least she had remembered to put them one by one to the left of her remaining Q and A.

K—E—Y—L—S—Q—A. What on earth could she do with that lot?

God, how she would like to murder Mike with an overdose. But there was no way to do it. Give him enough to put an end to him, and the symptoms would be immediately evident. Dr. Parker had explained all about it, at excessive length, when he had first put Mike on to the stuff.

No, there was no way she could fake things, even though it would be easy enough to dissolve every single one of the tablets in Mike's final whisky of the day. Okay, they were tasteless, as Dr. Parker had pointed out, solemnly warning her of—so far as she could make out—an entirely imaginary danger. But, as he had immediately added, it would require a dose of at least twenty tablets to be fatal. "Two, instead of the prescribed one, will just give him a mildly rough ride." God, how that man talked.

"Are you going to play, or not?"

Mike's voice cut in on her thoughts, and she realised, too, that his fingers had been drumming away hard. And yet—she could swear—she had not kept him waiting even half as long as he had taken over his last turn.

She gave her tiles a desperate look.

And, as if by magic, saw a word she could put down. Pretty clever, and never mind if it turned out not to score all that much.

In front of Mike's LOW that S, and at the other end of it an L and a Y.

SLOWLY.

Slowly. Was that, like the word MURDER, telling her something? She felt somehow it was. Was it a message? From Scrabble to her? A hint of a possible answer to the twanging question that had been in her mind as she had looked sightlessly at the letters on her rack? Would it be possible to murder Mike SLOWLY?

"Score twelve," Mike said, with open triumph, before she had even had time to tot it up herself. "Only one point more than my lulu last go."

Okay, she thought revengefully, but at least it was one point more.

She dug in the bag for her three replacement tiles. Ah, another U. So maybe she would be able to get rid of that damn Q sooner than she had thought. She put it down neatly on the right of the Q.

And at once realised that she had broken the rules of her system.

Damn, damn, damn. No hope of winning now. Not unless Mike happened to get a really lousy hand. As he almost never did.

This stupid game. Why, why, why did she have to play it? Night after night. Oh, what a wonderful world it would be if instead of that fanatic sitting opposite her she shared her life with someone else. Not even necessarily Peter Remington. Anybody. Anybody who didn't play Scrabble.

Well, maybe there was a chance for that. Perhaps Scrabble wouldn't punish her for her mistake this time, if what it had been telling her so far tonight really meant anything. So, right, ask Scrabble what it had meant by SLOWLY. How exactly could she murder Mike with an overdose SLOWLY?

Just think the question. That must be the way. Think it hard. And wait to see what letters came out of the bag. Give him small overdoses, do it slowly . . . But then what? Small overdoses were not going to kill Mike. Just make him have a few of Dr. Parker's "rough rides." She would have to do something a whole lot more effective than that.

Mike had already put down HOMES, tacking the S on to DIVORCE. Some pretty good score. Well, damn it, let him win. He wouldn't have many more times to. Not if what Scrabble had told her turned out to be any use, and if it would only follow it up.

She forced herself to think her question once more. Hard as she could. Till she felt tiny beads of sweat coming up behind her ears. And then looked again at the letters on her rack.

But no message pulsed out at her, look as she might. All right, she had an I and an E which could let her get that damn Q onto a

triple-letter square by putting QUIRE round the R of MURDER. But, relief though that would have been if this was an ordinary game, it was absolutely no use now.

Sadly, she admitted it to herself. By forgetting to keep strictly to her system when she had put that U next to her Q, she must have forfeited any help she had been getting from Scrabble.

But would it come to her aid the next time they played? If she was totally tough in the way she put letters onto her rack?

As the game wore on she hoped so more and more fiercely. Because from that point onwards she had the most diabolical letters. The J and the Z both coming into her hand at once while she still had not got rid of the K—always a difficult letter—which she had picked up before she had put down SLOWLY. And there had never seemed anywhere to get rid of any of them, till right at the end she did at least manage to put the Z on a double-letter square.

Mike won 447 to 308.

Well, here's to the next time, she thought.

It was three nights later that the next time, as Millie had thought of it, arrived. They had gone out the two evenings before, first to the Schwartzes, then to the Remingtons. Each time they had played Scrabble. Mike had really insisted, although Rita Schwartz had said quite plainly she wasn't too keen and Peter Remington had obviously, at least in Millie's view, wanted to spend the evening discussing neighbourhood problems. But on both occasions, when they had eventually settled round the board, Millie had deliberately not operated her system. She wanted to make sure it would be in working order when she came to play without anyone other than Mike being there to comment on the nature of the words she hoped Scrabble would spell out for her.

So on the third night, at home, she was for once really eager to play. Not that Mike noticed, any more than he had noticed her reluctance in the days when she had still thought it was possible to get him to do something else.

Mike picked an A when they were drawing tiles to see who was to begin. Bad sign. For a few moments Millie thought with spiralling dismay that her system had somehow stopped operating forever. But when she put her first pick-up into her rack, taking, of course, every care to place each new letter to the left of the one before, her spirits began to rise. No obvious word was being spelt out, backwards or forwards, but the batch looked decently hopeful, even if

rather lacking in vowels. Still, whatever Mike put down first was bound to supply at least one more of those. H—C—T—P—S (always good to get an S early, to tack on with luck to something high scoring) and then the vowel, an I, and finally a D.

She was about to begin fiddling around to see what word might emerge, something allowable under the system provided all the tiles had first been put in the rack in the correct way, when, noisily clicking, Mike jabbed down his starter. ABACK. Just the sort of damn old-fashioned word he was always so proud of knowing.

"Not bad," he said, actually rubbing his hands together. "See, I get my K on a double, and, with the double score for going first, that's twenty with just that one letter. So, total, thirty-six. Beat that."

Millie felt a sudden tumble of depression. The bastard had made a good start. A very good start. And, when he did, the game was apt to go on the way it had begun, with her trailing along the whole time getting further and further behind.

She looked at the tiles in front of her. No longer did they seem promising. So, after all, Scrabble was not going to do right by her. That one mistake the last time she had played against Mike must have put an end to the whole marvellously magic process.

All right, Mike had given her an A now, two in fact, to make up for her lack of more vowels than that I. But, damn it, she couldn't see any word that—

And then she could.

With fingers that were actually trembling she put down the seven letters she had collected in the exact reverse order she had placed them in her rack, slotting them neatly round the first A of Mike's clever-clever ABACK.

D—I—S—P—A—T—C—H

Maybe it wasn't instructions about what to do about Mike—a dispatch was some sort of a military message, wasn't it?—but, by God, she had had a Scrabble to start the game with.

Rapidly she counted her score. Four for the D, which luckily had landed on a double-letter light-blue square, plus one for her I, plus one for S, plus three for P, plus one for Mike's A, plus one for T, plus three for C, plus four. Pity the final H hadn't quite landed on a double-letter. One off. But never mind. Total eighteen, with fifty for the Scrabble, sixty-eight. That made his thirty-six look pretty silly.

As she could see from his face when she glanced up from the board.

And, what's more, she thought gleefully, he's having trouble finding anything to make a decent score in his new pick-up.

She toyed with doing some finger-drumming, but decided to let him off. He had worse coming to him than that. Much, much worse. Even if Scrabble had not yet begun to produce any messages.

But wait. Wait. Surely Scrabble had. Didn't *dispatch* mean something else? *I will dispatch him on the instant*. Wasn't there a line like that in some old play. Shakespeare or somebody. She must have been made to read it in school.

So Scrabble was coming to her aid after all.

Now, she must ask, thinking the question as hard as she could, just how Scrabble thought Mike could be finally disposed of. Dispatched. Slowly. That had been the beginning of the message last time. Slowly. So somehow it must be possible to get rid of Mike slowly, and because of that not be found out.

And then . . . Then never another game of Scrabble as long as she lived.

At last, face contorted with disappointment, Mike put down his next word, HONE. ONE running down from the last letter of DISPATCH and at least scoring a double, though even with that he had made no more than fourteen.

Still way behind. And long may he stay there.

Only now did she take a proper look at the seven letters she had picked up after her Scrabble, careful though she had been to put them down in the correct way. T—E—U—Q . . . Lucky the U had come before the Q, otherwise she might have forgotten in her excitement at picking them both up at the same time, and put them in with the U on the right of the Q. And that would have shut off all messages for this night, if not forever. Bound to.

But what were these last two letters? Two Vs. She was never going to get those down all in one go. It was hard enough to get rid of a V anyhow. The number of times she had had to put down just VIA for a score of six.

Oh God, Mike's fingers on the arm of his chair were beginning to twitch. If he started drumming now every half-seen idea would go out of her head.

Ah, but look. Reading backwards, she at least had QUET there. Could she find a spare I on the board and put down QUIET. If it came on a double she would certainly settle for it. Mike would lecture her, of course, about not making full use of the Q, but to hell with him. She was well ahead, and often—surely—it was quite a good idea to

get rid of a Q rather than have it hanging about in your hand, leaving you effectively with only six tiles to play with.

Then, peering at the board to see if QUIET did hit a double-word square somewhere, she realised that—better, better, better—the Q would go on the triple-letter space, two squares up from the I of DISPATCH. She banged the tiles down. Thirty-four. Not bad. Not bad at all. Even if it didn't seem to be a message.

And Mike's face was looking glummer than ever. Good.

Until suddenly a light came into his eyes, and, without hesitation, he clipped down two letters on the end of her QUIET. A U and an S.

QUIETUS. What the hell was that? No point in challenging it. Mike's store of funny words was always too much for her.

And in any case—she could tell from the fat-cat look coming onto his face—he was going to tell her all about it.

"Quietus," he said. "An old-fashioned word, of course. But still extant, I think. You remember Hamlet. The "To be or not to be" speech. *Shall his quietus make with a bare bodkin*. A bodkin, of course, is not the heavy sewing-needle of today, but any sort of a dagger, if I've got it right."

You damn well know you have, Millie thought. You self-satisfied prig.

And then she realised. A dagger. A dagger making somebody's *quietus*. Murder, in ordinary language. Scrabble was talking to her, even using Mike to do it. Babbling a bit, maybe. Scrabble babble. But it was making its point. *Stand by for further information*. That's what Scrabble was saying. All right, she'd stand by okay.

In the event she had to stand by longer than she had expected. It was only after four more goes that Scrabble managed to take advantage of the letters Mike had put down to produce a word she recognised as being instructions. SLOWLY. Once again the word she had been given just before communication broke down last time. Scrabble picking up where it had left off.

Then, two turns later, she found in her hand L—L—I—P, together with the two Vs she had still not managed to put down and the Z. Obviously, those last three were no help. But, she saw suddenly, using the still vacant S of QUIETUS she could put down PILLS. Now Scrabble was talking. And she had the P on a double-letter square, too, and the whole word hit a pink double-score. Total—she counted rapidly on her fingers, ignoring the fact that it always brought Mike's scorn down on her—of twenty. Not bad at all. So

never mind that the P came to the edge of the board only a tempting three blank squares from the red triple-word in the corner or four away from the red above. Let Mike use one or the other of those if he could. She still had a good many points to spare.

She kept her lead, too, even though Mike produced UFF to get down from her P to the triple and score thirty-six. But soon she hardly worried whether she would win or not: Scrabble began contriving to send its messages fast as faxes. First, following on from PILLS, there had come DOSE, and then DOUBLE. Right, she thought, double his dose of the heart pills. Okay, it would do no more than give him Dr. Parker's rough rides each night, but for sure Scrabble had something more up its sleeve.

It had.

MONTH, it spelt out for her. At first she had believed this could not be part of her instructions. But then she wondered. It had scored only eleven, as to get it down at all she had had to make use of a spare O on the board. So why had Scrabble given her such rotten letters? The answer came in her next pick-up, put into her rack, of course, in the magic order. P—I—R—T. At once she saw, reading the letters the right way, that, with a leftover L and E, she had TRIPLE and she could get that down on the board by putting the final E next to an N going begging. Scrabble, plainly, was telling her to give Mike double doses of his tablets for one month and then increase that to triple. It would make his rough rides seem gradually to be getting worse.

And then... Then—the whole scheme came to her in a flash—after Mike had mysteriously become more and more sick she would have to slip him something that would give him a final fatal coronary, but not be poison itself. Dr. Parker would believe death had occurred in the course of an illness he had never quite succeeded in controlling. What she would have to use for the final fatal dose she could not guess. But she could rely on Scrabble, Scrabble who had told her so much already, to give her the answer when it was needed.

But then a snag came into her mind. A terrible snag. Adding an extra tablet each night to Mike's final whisky, never mind adding two, would exhaust the supply Dr. Parker had prescribed for him in half the time he had allowed, less when she moved on to the triple dose. How could she get over that? Had Scrabble failed to work out the implications? Or... Or was it—this was worse, far worse,

awful—was Scrabble deliberately leading her down the primrose path to . . . To arrest, trial, prison for life?

She must have been asking these questions in her head with tremendous force, it occurred to her afterwards, because the six replacement letters she picked up in place of TRIPLE at once supplied her with the necessary answer.

She had laid them in her rack, not for a moment forgetting the magic order, to the right of an X she had been left with, R—E—H—T—O—N. What did that spell? Then in an instant she saw it. Mike, the turn before, had put down PANDA—typical of him to think of a word like that—and now, as soon as he had had his next go, she could get her letters down, in order, starting from the spare final A of PANDA and at least score with a good word. Unless Mike used that A first.

She waited, screwed up with tension, for him to make up his mind where he was going to go. If he did use the A, she decided, it would mean her word was not part of Scrabble's instructions. But if she was allowed to get ANOTHER down, she had already worked out without Scrabble even having to tell her, what the whole message would be. ANOTHER DOCTOR.

Of course, it was the simple answer. Go to some other doctor and tell him or her she was suffering from exactly the symptoms Mike had had when his heart trouble began. Heaven knows, he had gone on about them enough. She could remember down to the last, tiniest detail. Then, almost certainly, she would be prescribed the very same tablets. She would have an automatic supply that would last as long as Scrabble thought the rough-rides treatment should continue. It was perfect.

Provided Mike didn't use that A. It was—she looked over the whole board once more—the only possible one she could take advantage of. If she couldn't have it she would be left with just planking down OTHER. Meaning perhaps *Think of some OTHER way out of your misery.*

Mike was in one of his fiddling states. Probably trying for a Scrabble with a lot of letters that had just too many Es or some other vowel among them ever to make a word. The sort of thing that, when it happened with her, would set Mike's fingers drum-drum-drumming till she could have reached across the board and hit him.

Then, at last, he selected some tiles from his rack. How many? Not seven, surely. No, only three. And with extremely bad grace he was putting them down to score a very feeble, if Mike-ish, word,

DELL. But, thank goodness, it was right at the other side of the board from PANDA.

She swooped down with NOTHER.

"I am taking the last three tiles," Mike said, dipping into the bag. "It's one's duty to give warning of that."

"Okay, take, take," she replied. "I should worry. I'm a good fifty points ahead."

"Fifty-two, to be accurate. And I will remind you that I still have a total of seven tiles in my hand, and a Scrabble would give me fifty points, let alone what else it might score."

So it was all the more a pleasure to her when the best that Mike could manage to do, after endless jiggling on his rack, was to get down just three tiles, POD. And at the same time that gave her—ha, ha—a neat chance to put her last remaining tile, that X, on to a light-blue double-letter space in a corner under the O of POD and next to an E in PENCIL. OX and EX. Well, pretty soon she would be Mike's ex. Or, better, his widow. Fair, free, and forty-something.

"Seventeen plus seventeen," she said. "Thirty-four, and out."

After that night Millie deliberately refrained from operating her system. Scrabble had told her plenty to be getting on with, and she hardly cared now whether she won or lost at their almost nightly games (Mike seemed less and less willing to go out in the evening, even to the Remingtons or the Schwartzes).

But if she refrained from using the system, she did not refrain from following Scrabble's instructions. She went at once to a certain Dr. Kochowski and got from him, as she had somehow known she would, exactly the same prescription as Dr. Parker had given Mike, only without all Dr. Parker's long over-cautious warnings. For a month precisely, she had dropped a single extra tablet into the last-thing Scotch Mike liked her to prepare for him, a routine that dated back to their first lovey-dovey married days—before even they had played Scrabble together once.

Mike, she noted with quiet triumph, had rough rides at night from the very first dose onwards. Then, when in the next month she increased the dose by one more tablet, his rides became correspondingly rougher. It was now that she urged him to consult Dr. Parker again, delighting in the fact, as a sign that Mike had no idea what was happening, that getting him to make an appointment had required a lot of persuasion. She even contrived, as a precaution against any eventual suspicions, to confide in Rita Schwartz fears

that Mike was ignoring worrying symptoms of some mysterious sort.

It was even more of a pleasure to her when Mike, after a third consultation at the surgery, came back saying Dr. Parker was "no damn good at all."

Then, as the end of the month of triple-dose rough rides drew near, she decided it was time to have a consultation of her own. With Dr. Scrabble.

So, next evening she reverted to arranging her tiles strictly from right to left. And, the moment she put the last of her first batch into place, she realised what they had spelt. G—N—I—L—L—I—K, KILLING. Triumph running through her like a great draught of wine, she scooped the whole bunch up—she was the one to go first—and banged them down on the board, even getting that five-point K onto the double, four squares away from the starting star, almost without having to think about it.

"Wow," Mike said, "you certainly look as if you're going to make a killing tonight."

He hooted—in that disgusting way he had—at his own joke.

"Just luck," she replied, calm as could be. "Everyone has to have a bit of luck sometimes."

"Yeah. And, you know, I think I've worked out what brings you yours. I happened to notice it weeks ago when you had a terrific run of wins, and now you've done it again. You put your tiles into your rack in reverse order, from right to left, for some damn womanish reason. But, whenever you do it, things seem to go like a breeze for you. I think I'm going to try myself."

"Oh, no. No, Mike, don't."

She felt sick.

She didn't know whether the system would work for anyone other than herself. But she had a horrible feeling that if anyone else used it—and especially Mike—the magic was bound to come to an end for her. And she couldn't afford that. Not now. Now when she needed the final piece of information Dr. Scrabble had promised her. The name of whatever it was that she could use to finish the job. She had to have that. She had to.

"Oh," Mike was saying, "so I've guessed your little secret, have I? No wonder you don't want me to try it."

"It—it isn't that," she said.

"No? So what is it? You can't stop me seeing how well it'd work for me, baby. I know the trick now. Nothing you can do about it."

She thought furiously.

"Oh, come on," she managed to say at last. "You can't believe a silly superstition like that will really make a difference."

"It did for you, sweetheart."

And down onto his rack went the tiles he had been keeping in his big fist ever since he had fished them from the bag. Down from right to left.

"Now, let's see what we have," he said. "Hm. Yeah. Hey, yeah. Watch this."

Onto the board went, click, click, click, on top of the G of her KILLING an N. Then an I, and two Ts, then another I, and then a U. Now, above, there was only one square left, at the top of the board. And Milly realised at once, with a quick thump of defeat, what letter was bound to go there. The Q. QUITTING. A Scrabble, and God knows how much it would score.

In a moment Mike told her.

"I make that twenty-two, with the U and the second I on triple-letters," he said. "Plus fifty, seventy-two. Gives me a nice edge on your sixty-seven for KILLING."

Millie dipped her hand in the bag and gathered up seven new tiles. But how was she to put them down in her rack, she asked herself. To do it in right-to-left order would only confirm Mike in his discovery. But to stick them down anyhow would be to lose the advice of Dr. Scrabble. Certainly for this evening, perhaps even forever.

She was still hesitating when Mike spoke again.

"You know," he said, in a voice a good deal more reflective than his habitual nowadays bawl. "You know, I've got a feeling there's even more to this trick of yours than you think."

"What do you mean?"

Could he have guessed? Surely not. Even Mike, proddingly sharp as he was, could never have penetrated so far as to have discovered she was receiving murder instructions from the fall of Scrabble tiles.

"Yes," he said, still in that subdued tone. "I can't help thinking that I'm getting a message here."

"A message? You?"

Then she realised that in her astonishment she had betrayed herself. That "You" could only mean she herself had been getting messages. But too late. Too late.

Yet Mike did not appear to have seized on the point. For once he seemed too wrapped up in whatever it was he was thinking.

"Quitting," he said. "Would you believe that very word has been in my mind, buried but in my mind, for—oh, I don't know—certainly a couple of weeks now."

"What do you mean *quitting*?" she said.

Quitting was not something she had ever associated with Mike. He would never quit at anything he put his hand to. She had once admired it in him. But since he had taken so unquittingly to Scrabble she had come to find it a quality as much bad as good. More bad, really.

"Well," he answered slowly, "you know I've not been feeling too well for a long time now. Dr. Parker doesn't seem to have any explanation, but I think it's actually because I'm just tired out. Hell, I've given my all to the company ever since I started work, and I just think I've had enough."

"Enough? Enough of what?"

"Of work, stress, slog, responsibility. It's killing me. Maybe it is really killing me, and perhaps the mere chance of you having that Scrabble KILLING was what made me finally realise it. Frankly, the time has come for me to retire. A little prematurely, okay. But when your whole health's at stake, I think you've got to make the decision. However tough it is."

He gave a quick smile, a little like the smiles she remembered from the days before their marriage.

"You know," he said, "I think that my Scrabble was telling me something, too. I really do. As if it was some sort of message. From beyond. Quitting: it was telling me it's time I did just that."

Millie sat and thought.

This was a whole new ball game. Was it something she wanted? What would it be like having Mike around all the time? Would it mean that she had, there every minute from breakfast to bedtime, the Mike she saw nowadays, the loudmouth, the know-it-all, the constant aggressor? Or would it perhaps be like going back to the old days? Back to the days when he had hurried home from the office every evening as early as he could, not for any special purpose, and certainly not so as to play Scrabble, but just for the pleasure of being with her?

"Like the idea?" Mike said.

Did she? Perhaps she did. She looked at the new life that had so unexpectedly opened out in front of her. Would she and Mike do things together, as they had done in those early days? Go out together in the mornings or afternoons? To a show perhaps, or even

simply shopping. Or they could take up golf, both of them. Or they could just work in the garden. Side by side. Yes. Yes, Mike in retirement could make her a life she would like. Yes.

How had it come about that she had let herself think of killing him? Killing her husband? Worse, how had it happened that she had actually begun the process. Dabbling in murder. That's what it had been. How could she have let herself be guided, controlled, by Scrabble? Scrabble dabble, after Scrabble babble. What a mercy she had never learnt what it was that had been going to deliver the deathblow.

And she couldn't ever now, not when Mike had guessed the secret of how to get Scrabble to help you.

"Hey, you know what?" Mike's voice came to her.

"No? What?"

"Scrabble," Mike said. "When I'm retired we could play Scrabble in the afternoons. Maybe in the mornings too, if we felt really hot. We could have all-day sessions. Best man at the end has to—has to what? Say, give the other dinner or something. How about that? How about that? Good old Scrabble every day and each day all the rest of our lives."



DETECTIVERSE

BURGLAR BURGLER

by ANNE WINGATE

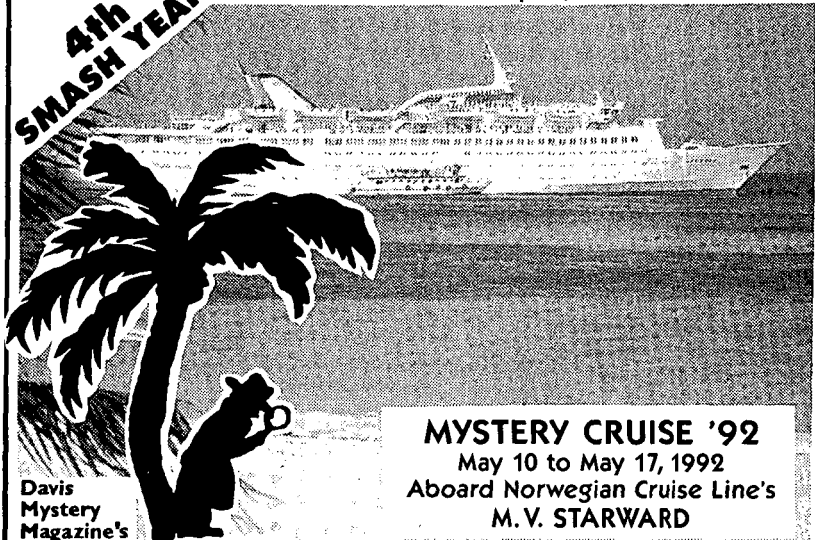
The burglar just wished he had seen 'er!
He yelled, getting meaner and meaner.
He packed all his loot
In the pants of his suit
And his wife sent it off to the cleaner.

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In 1967, Ed Hoch received the Mystery Writers of America's annual Edgar Allan Poe Award for a story that has never before appeared in EQMM. Anthony Boucher had this to say about "The Oblong Room" in his introduction to the 1967 edition of Best Detective Stories of the Year, in which the story appeared after its first publication in The Saint Mystery Magazine: "This may remind you of some of the short stories of Georges Simenon: deceptively simple plot, style, and narrative method; patient detection; strong creation of mood; . . . and a final breath-taking shock of illumination."

For fans of Captain Leopold, a look at one of his most intriguing early cases . . .

THE OBLONG ROOM

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was Fletcher's case from the beginning, but Captain Leopold rode along with him when the original call came in. The thing seemed open and shut, with the only suspect found literally standing over his victim, and on a dull day Leopold thought that a ride out to the University might be pleasant.

Here, along the river, the October color was already in the trees, and through the park a slight haze of burning leaves clouded the road in spots. It was a warm day for autumn, a sunny day. Not really a day for murder.

"The University hasn't changed much," Leopold commented, as they turned onto the narrow street that led past the fraternity houses to the library tower. "A few new dorms and a new stadium. That's about all."

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"We haven't had a case here since that bombing four or five years back," Fletcher said. "This one looks to be a lot easier, though. They've got the guy already. Stabbed his roommate and then stayed right there with the body."

Leopold was silent. They'd pulled up before one of the big new dormitories that towered toward the sky like some middle-income housing project, all brick and concrete and right now surrounded by milling students. Leopold pinned on his badge and led the way.

The room was on the fourth floor, facing the river. It seemed to be identical to all the others—a depressing oblong with bunk beds, twin study desks, wardrobes, and a large picture window opposite the door. The medical examiner was already there, and he looked up as Leopold and Fletcher entered. "We're ready to move him. All right with you, Captain?"

"The boys get their pictures? Then it's fine with me. Fletcher, find out what you can." Then, to the medical examiner, "What killed him?"

"A couple of stab wounds. I'll do an autopsy, but there's not much doubt."

"How long dead?"

"A day or so."

"A day!"

Fletcher had been making notes as he questioned the others. "The precinct men have it pretty well wrapped up for us, Captain. The dead boy is Ralph Rollings, a sophomore. His roommate admits to being here with the body for maybe twenty hours before they were discovered. Roommate's name is Tom McBern. They've got him in the next room."

Leopold nodded and went through the connecting door. Tom McBern was tall and slender, and handsome in a dark collegiate sort of way. "Have you warned him of his rights?" Leopold asked a patrolman.

"Yes, sir."

"All right." Leopold sat down on the bed opposite McBern. "What have you got to say, son?"

The deep brown eyes came up to meet Leopold's. "Nothing, sir. I think I want a lawyer."

"That's your privilege, of course. You don't wish to make any statement about how your roommate met his death, or why you remained in the room with him for several hours without reporting it?"

"No, sir." He turned away and stared out the window.

"You understand we'll have to book you on suspicion of homicide."

The boy said nothing more, and after a few moments Leopold left him alone with the officer. He went back to Fletcher and watched while the body was covered and carried away. "He's not talking. Wants a lawyer. Where are we?"

Sergeant Fletcher shrugged. "All we need is motive. They probably had the same girl or something."

"Find out."

They went to talk with the boy who occupied the adjoining room, the one who'd found the body. He was sandy-haired and handsome, with the look of an athlete, and his name was Bill Smith.

"Tell us how it was, Bill," Leopold said.

"There's not much to tell. I knew Ralph and Tom slightly during my freshman year, but never really well. They stuck pretty much together. This year I got the room next to them, but the connecting door was always locked. Anyway, yesterday neither one of them showed up at class. When I came back yesterday afternoon, I knocked at the door and asked if anything was wrong. Tom called out that they were sick. He wouldn't open the door. I went into my own room and didn't think much about it. Then, this morning, I knocked to see how they were. Tom's voice sounded so . . . strange."

"Where was your own roommate all this time?"

"He's away. His father died and he went home for the funeral." Smith's hands were nervous, busy with a shredded piece of paper. Leopold offered him a cigarette and he took it. "Anyway, when he wouldn't open the door I became quite concerned and told him I was going for help. He opened it then—and I saw Ralph stretched out on the bed, all bloody and . . . dead."

Leopold nodded and went to stand by the window. From here he could see the trees down along the river, blazing gold and amber and scarlet as the October sun passed across them. "Had you heard any sounds the previous day? Any argument?"

"No. Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Had they disagreed in the past about anything?"

"Not that I knew of. If they didn't get along, they hardly would have asked to room together again this year."

"How about girls?" Leopold asked.

"They both dated occasionally, I think."

"No special one? One they both liked?"

Bill Smith was silent for a fraction too long. "No."

"You're sure?"

"I told you I didn't know them very well."

"This is murder, Bill. It's not a sophomore dance or Class Day games."

"Tom killed him. What more do you need?"

"What's her name, Bill?"

He stubbed out the cigarette and looked away. Then finally he answered. "Stella Banting. She's a junior."

"Which one did she go with?"

"I don't know. She was friendly with both of them. I think she went out with Ralph a few times around last Christmas, but I've seen her with Tom lately."

"She's older than them?"

"No. They're all twenty. She's just a year ahead."

"All right," Leopold said. "Sergeant Fletcher will want to question you further."

He left Smith's room and went out in the hall with Fletcher. "It's your case, Sergeant. About time I gave it to you."

"Thanks for the help, Captain."

"Let him talk to a lawyer and then see if he has a story. If he still won't make a statement, book him on suspicion. I don't think there's any doubt we can get an indictment."

"You going to talk to that girl?"

Leopold smiled. "I just might. Smith seemed a bit shy about her. Might be a motive there. Let me know as soon as the medical examiner has something more definite about the time of death."

"Right, Captain."

Leopold went downstairs, pushing his way through the students and faculty members still crowding the halls and stairways. Outside he unpinning the badge and put it away. The air was fresh and crisp as he strolled across the campus to the administration building.

Stella Banting lived in the largest sorority house on campus, a great columned building of ivy and red brick. But when Captain Leopold found her she was on her way back from the drugstore, carrying a carton of cigarettes and a bottle of shampoo. Stella was a tall girl with firm, angular lines and a face that might have been beautiful if she ever smiled.

"Stella Banting?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Captain Leopold. I wanted to talk to you about the tragedy over at the men's dorm. I trust you've heard about it?"

She blinked her eyes and said, "Yes. I've heard."

"Could we go somewhere and talk?"

"I'll drop these at the house and we can talk if you'd like. I don't want to talk there."

She was wearing faded bermuda shorts and a bulky sweatshirt, and walking with her made Leopold feel young again. If only she smiled occasionally—but perhaps this was not a day for smiling. They headed away from the main campus, out toward the silent oval of the athletic field and sports stadium. "You didn't come over to the dorm," he said to her finally, breaking the silence of their walk.

"Should I have?"

"I understood you were friendly with them—that you dated the dead boy last Christmas and Tom McBern more recently."

"A few times. Ralph wasn't the sort anyone ever got to know very well."

"And what about Tom?"

"He was a nice fellow."

"Was?"

"It's hard to explain. Ralph did things to people, to everyone around him. When I felt it happening to me, I broke away."

"What sort of things?"

"He had a power—a power you wouldn't believe any twenty-year-old capable of."

"You sound as if you've known a lot of them."

"I have. This is my third year at the University. I've grown up a lot in that time. I think I have anyway."

"And what about Tom McBern?"

"I dated him a few times recently just to confirm for myself how bad things were. He was completely under Ralph's thumb. He lived for no one but Ralph."

"Homosexual?" Leopold asked.

"No, I don't think it was anything as blatant as that. It was more the relationship of teacher and pupil, leader and follower."

"Master and slave?"

She turned to smile at him. "You do seem intent on midnight orgies, don't you?"

"The boy is dead, after all."

"Yes. Yes, he is." She stared down at the ground, kicking randomly at the little clusters of fallen leaves. "But you see what I

mean? Ralph was always the leader, the teacher—for Tom, almost the messiah.”

“Then why would he have killed him?” Leopold asked.

“That’s just it—he wouldn’t! Whatever happened in that room, I can’t imagine Tom McBern ever bringing himself to kill Ralph.”

“There is one possibility; Miss Banting. Could Ralph Rollings have made a disparaging remark about you? Something about when he was dating you?”

“I never slept with Ralph, if that’s what you’re trying to ask me. With either of them, for that matter.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“It happened just the way I’ve told you. If anything, I was afraid of Ralph. I didn’t want him getting that sort of hold over me.”

Somehow he knew they’d reached the end of their stroll, even though they were still in the middle of the campus quadrangle, some distance from the sports arena. “Thank you for your help, Miss Banting. I may want to call on you again.”

He left her there and headed back toward the men’s dorm, knowing that she would watch him until he was out of sight.

Sergeant Fletcher found Leopold in his office early the following morning, reading the daily reports of the night’s activities. “Don’t you ever sleep, Captain?” he asked, pulling up the faded leather chair that served for infrequent visitors.

“I’ll have enough time for sleeping when I’m dead. What have you got on McBern?”

“His lawyer says he refuses to make a statement, but I gather they’d like to plead him not guilty by reason of insanity.”

“What’s the medical examiner say?”

Fletcher read from a typed sheet. “Two stab wounds, both in the area of the heart. He apparently was stretched out on the bed when he got it.”

“How long before they found him?”

“He’d eaten breakfast maybe an hour or so before he died, and from our questioning that places the time of death at about ten o’clock. Bill Smith went to the door and got McBern to open it at about eight the following morning. Since we know McBern was in the room the previous evening when Smith spoke to him through the door, we can assume he was alone with the body for approximately twenty-two hours.”

Leopold was staring out the window, mentally comparing the city's autumn gloom with the colors of the countryside that he'd witnessed the previous day. Everything dies, only it dies a little sooner, a bit more drably, in the city. "What else?" he asked Fletcher, because there obviously was something else.

"In one of the desk drawers," Fletcher said, producing a little evidence envelope. "Six sugar cubes, saturated with LSD."

"All right." Leopold stared down at them. "I guess that's not too unusual on campuses these days. Has there ever been a murder committed by anyone under the influence of LSD?"

"A case out West somewhere. And I think another one over in England."

"Can we get a conviction, or is this the basis of the insanity plea?"

"I'll check on it, Captain."

"And one more thing—get that fellow Smith in here. I want to talk with him again."

Later, alone, Leopold felt profoundly depressed. The case bothered him. McBern had stayed with Rollings's body for twenty-two hours. Anybody that could last that long would have to be crazy. He was crazy and he was a killer and that was all there was to it.

When Fletcher ushered Bill Smith into the office an hour later, Leopold was staring out the window. He turned and motioned the young man to a chair. "I have some further questions, Bill."

"Yes?"

"Tell me about the LSD."

"What?"

Leopold walked over and sat on the edge of the desk. "Don't pretend you never heard of it. Rollings and McBern had some in their room."

Bill Smith looked away. "I didn't know. There were rumors."

"Nothing else? No noise through that connecting door?"

"Noise, yes. Sometimes it was . . ."

Leopold waited for him to continue, and when he did not, said, "This is a murder investigation, Bill."

"Rollings . . . he deserved to die, that's all. He was the most completely evil person I ever knew. The things he did to poor Tom . . ."

"Stella Banting says Tom almost worshipped him."

"He did, and that's what made it all the more terrible."

Leopold leaned back and lit a cigarette. "If they were both high on LSD, almost anyone could have entered that room and stabbed Ralph."

But Bill Smith shook his head. "I doubt it. They wouldn't have dared unlock the door while they were turned on. Besides, Tom would have protected him with his own life."

"And yet we're to believe that Tom killed him? That he stabbed him to death and then spent a day and a night alone with the body? Doing what, Bill? Doing what?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think Tom McBern is insane?"

"No, not really. Not legally." He glanced away. "But on the subject of Rollings, he was pretty far gone. Once, when we were still friendly, he told me he'd do anything for Rollings—even trust him with his life. And he did, one time. It was during the Spring Weekend and everybody had been drinking a lot. Tom hung upside down out of the dorm window with Rollings holding his ankles. That's how much he trusted him."

"I think I'll have to talk with Tom McBern again," Leopold said. "At the scene of the crime."

Fletcher brought Tom McBern out to the campus in handcuffs, and Captain Leopold was waiting for them in the oblong room on the fourth floor. "All right, Fletcher," Leopold said. "You can leave us alone. Wait outside."

McBern had lost a good deal of his previous composure, and now he faced Leopold with red-ringed eyes and a lip that trembled when he spoke. "What . . . what did you want to ask me?"

"A great many things, son. All the questions in the world." Leopold sighed and offered the boy a cigarette. "You and Rollings were taking LSD, weren't you?"

"We took it, yes."

"Why? For kicks?"

"Not for kicks. You don't understand about Ralph."

"I understand that you killed him. What more is there to understand? You stabbed him to death right over there on that bed."

Tom McBern took a deep breath. "We didn't take LSD for kicks," he repeated. "It was more to heighten the sense of religious experience—a sort of mystical involvement that is the whole meaning of life."

Leopold frowned down at the boy. "I'm only a detective, son. You and Rollings were strangers to me until yesterday, and I guess now he'll always be a stranger to me. That's one of the troubles with my job. I don't get to meet people until it's too late, until the dam-

age"—he gestured toward the empty bed—"is already done. But I want to know what happened in this room, between you two. I don't want to hear about mysticism or religious experience. I want to hear what happened—why you killed him and why you sat here with the body for twenty-two hours."

Tom McBern looked up at the walls, seeing them perhaps for the first and thousandth time. "Did you ever think about this room? About the shape of it? Ralph used to say it reminded him of a story by Poe, 'The Oblong Box.' Remember that story? The box was on board a ship, and of course it contained a body. Like Queequeg's coffin which rose from the sea to rescue Ishmael."

"And this room was Ralph's coffin?" Leopold asked quietly.

"Yes." McBern stared down at his handcuffed wrists. "His tomb."

"You killed him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Leopold looked away. "Do you want your lawyer?"

"No. Nothing."

"My God! Twenty-two hours!"

"I was—"

"I know what you were doing. But I don't think you'll ever tell it to a judge and jury."

"I'll tell you, because maybe you can understand." And he began to talk in a slow, quiet voice, and Leopold listened because that was his job.

Toward evening, when Tom McBern had been returned to his cell and Fletcher sat alone with Leopold, he said, "I've called the District Attorney, Captain. What are you going to tell him?"

"The facts, I suppose. McBern will sign a confession of just how it happened. The rest is out of our hands."

"Do you want to tell me about it, Captain?"

"I don't think I want to tell anyone about it. But I suppose I have to. I guess it was all that talk of religious experience and coffins rising from the ocean that tipped me off. You know that Rollings pictured their room as a sort of tomb."

"For him it was."

"I wish I'd known him, Fletcher. I only wish I'd known him in time."

"What would you have done?"

"Perhaps only listened and tried to understand him."

"McBern admitted killing him?"

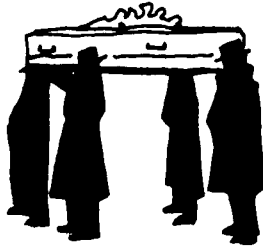
Leopold nodded. "It seems that Rollings asked him to, and Tom McBern trusted him more than life itself."

"Rollings asked to be stabbed through the heart?"

"Yes."

"Then why did McBern stay with the body so long? For a whole day and night?"

"He was waiting," Leopold said quietly, looking at nothing at all. "He was waiting for Rollings to rise from the dead."



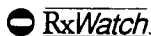
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a **NEW** short story by

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"Listen everyone," urged the armchair, its voice taking up the impatient beat, "if my detective's ghost is here that means the Reverend Digby Bight was innocent of the crime for which he was tried, convicted, and executed."

"Perhaps," suggested the bookcase, "your spectral investigator has been denied final rest until it solves this crime which baffled it in life."

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DARK POSSESSIONS

by JAMES POWELL

A shaft of late afternoon sun slanted through the high window and found the dusty corner of the attic where the furniture stood. The attic's one constant sound was loudest there, the earnest buzz of the colony of yellow jackets that had found a way in under the eaves and made a home where the chamber pot once sat behind the square door in Cook's bird's-eye maple washstand.

It was a very hot Toronto day. Suddenly the springs of the over-stuffed armchair groaned as though beneath the weight of a heavy man. The noise woke the armchair which, being mostly horsehair, had been dreaming it was a stallion galloping free. "What was that?" it wondered. Like ghostly sap this unspoken question seeped down to the attic floorboards and spread across to the rest of the furniture.

The bookcase, whose shelves, once fat with books, now held empty canning jars, said, "You tell us. You're the detective." The bookcase believed in metonymy, the container for the thing contained, the armchair for the armchair detective.

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For years the city's famous detective had used the services of the armchair as he untangled those dark riddles of the human heart which his author friend later published with fanciful titles like "The Grenadier Pond Horror," "The Thing in the Casa Loma Oubliette," and "The Man in the Empty Overshoes." The armchair couldn't have denied the long-dead detective if it wanted to. It still bore, high on its upholstered back, the stain from the pomade the man started wearing not long after he appeared on petite Mrs. Crawley's Shuter Street doorstep to rent the furnished front room on the second floor.

The armchair pondered the question and replied, "It must mean the ghost of my detective has returned."

"The one who died of a broken heart?" asked the slant-top writing desk with the glass-doored cabinet above and the claw-and-ball feet below. The sheaf of forgotten love letters the desk had guarded so long in its secret compartment may explain its romantic point of view.

"A punctured ego is more like it," sniffed the upright piano stool. It resented the desk, which had been carried up the attic steps when the stool's beloved companion, the piano, had been carted away by a dealer in second-hand musical instruments. Since that terrible day the stool, though crammed with sheet music of every description, hummed only sad songs. "Imagine being a famous detective who can't solve a terrible murder committed right under your nose," it said.

"Yet he was so well-read," remembered the bookcase. "And he never turned down the corners of my books' pages."

"Once someone left a book about Chippendale furniture on my upper shelf," said the desk shyly. "While browsing through I found my claw-and-ball feet described as 'mignon.'" It paused, hoping the armchair would agree with the book. Although such emotions were rare between upholstered and unupholstered furniture, the desk felt a strong attraction to the armchair.

Sensing the desk's affection, the armchair always tried to be kind. But before it could think of something to say, spectral fingers started drumming on its right arm. "Listen, everyone," urged the armchair, its voice taking up the impatient beat, "if my detective's ghost is here that means the Reverend Digby Bight was innocent of the crime for which he was tried, convicted, and executed."

"Perhaps," suggested the bookcase, "your spectral investigator has been denied final rest until it solves this crime which baffled it

in life." The bookcase had sometimes held novels whose plots favored such dramatic turns.

"So unless we want to spend the rest of our days in a haunted attic," advised the armchair, "we'd better lend him a hand finding the real murderer."

The furniture fell silent, not really knowing where to begin. Then the dining room sideboard with the carved doors and the smell of dry rot about it gave a cough and said, "Speaking of books, after the Reverend Bight came to stay the detective always brought a book to the table."

"He might have turned his attention to my Miss Gow," wished the desk. "She'd have been happy for a kind word."

"Small wonder, though, that Mrs. Crawley fell head-over-heels for her new lodger," observed the washstand. "The Reverend Bight had a face as handsome as a strongbox."

"And such nobility of purpose," added the desk.

"Or so we thought," reminded the piano stool.

"Ah, yes," said the sideboard hoarsely. "I'd forgotten how he came by the money to pursue his medical studies at the University."

"Let's stick to the question at hand," insisted the armchair. "The Reverend Bight is not our murderer."

"Who said he was?" asked the washstand. "I told everybody that I never got a good look at the person searching Cook's room that fateful night. I was sleeping, remember? And when bird's-eye maple gets shut-eye it really gets shut-eye. Oh, I heard vague sounds like drawers being opened and things being slammed about. And I felt this searching hand slide under the newspaper lining my drawer. But before I could get all my eyes focused, whoever it was went out into the hall. Then I heard heavy steps coming up the stairs and Cook's beery voice call out, 'Oh, it's you. It's Holier-than-Thou. What the hell are—' Next came the thud and Cook cried out and fell back down the stairs."

The sideboard cleared its throat and said, "The police found the bloody poker from the living room fireplace set on the top step. But who'd want to do a thing like that to Cook?"

"Anybody who ate her food," said the armchair. "My detective moaned for an hour after every meal. He only stayed on in the house because he loved Mrs. Crawley."

"Yes," said the desk. "Miss Gow kept a tin of biscuits in our room to eat before dinner. At the table she'd just push things around on her plate. But she wouldn't move out, she loved the detective so."

"I still say the Reverend Bight did the deed," insisted the piano stool. "He was all holier-than-thou until it came out at the trial that he was a fugitive from justice, wanted down Strathroy way for forging his Aunt's will to make himself sole—"

"Hold on, there," interrupted the bookcase. "Wasn't Cook from Strathroy, too?"

"No," coughed the sideboard. "The Maritimes. Remember her flying into a rage when Miss Gow requested cod. She said she wouldn't allow cod in the house. She said only the poor ate cod. That's the Maritimes for you. Come to think of it, wasn't Mrs. Crawley a blue-nose, too? Amherst, Nova Scotia, wasn't it?"

"Don't ask me," said the washstand. "But I'll never forget the day Mrs. Crawley bought the house and us along with it as though we were, indeed, like the bill of sale described us, mere 'possessions,' mere 'chattels and movables.' Mrs. Crawley did all her own cooking then. It was a year or so before Cook arrived."

"Then Strathroy had to be Miss Gow," insisted the piano stool.

"No, she came from Stratford," said the desk. "I should know. She wrote home on me every week."

The sound of laughing furniture drifted up from downstairs where everything was blond wood and chrome in a contemporary Danish design. The furniture in the darkening attic, not understanding Danish, had long ago stopped trying to eavesdrop. Still they resented the laughter, suspecting, in furniture's self-centered way, that they had become the butt of some Danish joke.

When it was sure it would not be interrupted again, the piano stool returned to its argument, saying, "Bight swore on the stand he'd only tampered with the will because he felt this call to medical missionary work in China and needed the money for his studies. The Crown claimed Cook had stumbled onto his secret, and when she caught him searching for whatever it was she was blackmailing him with, he had to kill her. The Crown said open-and-shut case."

The armchair felt a ghostly fist pound hard on its upholstery. "Then the Crown is a royal ass," it said, parroting one of the detective's favorite expressions, adding, "The murderer meant to kill Cook from the start. Otherwise why bring the poker?"

The armchair gave the others time to chew on that. Then it continued, "So who is our murderer? Well, it wasn't my detective. He was dozing in my lap, a bit under the influence of drink as usual since the Reverend Bight's arrival. Cook's fall down the back stairs roused him. But he had to tie his tie, put on his jacket, and pull a comb

through his hair. Coming out his door he almost ran over Miss Gow, who was standing right there dressed for the street. She quickly hid something in her coat pocket. Then Mrs. Crawley, looking white as a sheet, came hurrying around the corner leading to Cook's room. 'An intruder has murdered Cook,' she said. 'Digby—the Reverend Bight—is downstairs calling the police.' ”

“Well, the back door was unlocked,” said the washstand. “Sometimes Cook forgot to lock it when she staggered home smelling like a beer barrel.”

“Of course, nobody believed Mrs. Crawley's story about being in her room with the Reverend until all the commotion,” added the piano stool. “But it made her a heroine in the eyes of the popular press—the woman who sacrificed her reputation to give the man she loved an alibi.”

“Maybe they *were* together,” said the armchair. “Or maybe she thought Bight needed an alibi. Or maybe *she* needed one. What about Miss Gow?”

“Every evening Miss Gow would write the detective a love letter,” explained the desk. “Then she'd go stand in the hall and pray for the courage to slide it under his door. And every night she'd come back and add the letter to the others she kept in my secret compartment. But on the night in question she'd also written her weekly letter home. She took it to the mailbox on Sherbourne, leaving several minutes before Cook fell down the stairs. I expect she used to walk to stiffen her resolve to deliver the detective's love letter. Would it shed any light on the case if I read those love letters aloud?”

Feeling the ghost of the detective squirm at the suggestion, the armchair said hastily, “Let's press on, shall we?” But the desk's words left the armchair wondering. Could metonymy explain the desk's unnatural attraction to it? Could Miss Gow's unsent love letters, which the desk had kept in its secret heart all those years, explain the desk's love for the detective's armchair? Stranger things had happened in the world of furniture.

The armchair put these thoughts aside for the moment and returned to the matter at hand. “What was the killer looking for in Cook's room?” it asked the others. “The police did a search and found nothing they could connect with the murder.”

“It does get tiresome, being flung open all the time,” observed the washstand. The others made sympathetic noises, except the bookcase, who had no drawers, doors, or lids.

The armchair ignored the interruption. "Two things we do know," it said. "Whatever the killer was looking for couldn't have been too accusatory or the killer wouldn't have murdered Cook before finding it. And it was thin enough to be hidden under the lining of a drawer."

First the washstand blinked. Then it wondered, "Say, what if it wasn't Amherst Mrs. Crawley came from. What if it was *Antigonish*?"

"So what?" demanded the armchair.

"Well, what if what the murderer was looking for wasn't *under* the liner," replied the washstand. "What if it *was* the liner."

The armchair felt the ghostly weight upon it grow tense.

The piano stool broke off humming the forlorn "Vagabond Tripoli Moon" from the once-popular light opera *Song of Tripoli*.

"Like Poe's 'Purloined Letter'," whispered the bookcase.

"How rococo," said the desk.

The excitement set the sideboard to coughing.

All this gave the washstand time to skim the second page of *The Antigonish Loyalist-Intelligencer* for March 1, 1903, which lined its drawer. When it found what it was looking for it began to read aloud. "A warrant has been issued for the arrest of Miss Asia Thwaites late of this city who escaped from custody by overpowering a prison matron while being transported to the Halifax courthouse to be sentenced following her conviction for grand theft. Our readers will recall that Miss Thwaites, formerly a payroll clerk at the Harbison Shipyard here, absconded with over twenty thousand dollars of her employer's money in April of last year. She was arrested several weeks later on a westbound train and returned to Halifax for trial. The money was never recovered."

"Tiny Mrs. Crawley was hardly one to overpower a prison matron," said the desk.

"Bought her off is more likely," said the piano stool. "Maybe the matron got greedy and tracked Mrs. Crawley here intent on blackmail. Mrs. Crawley sure didn't keep Cook around for her cooking."

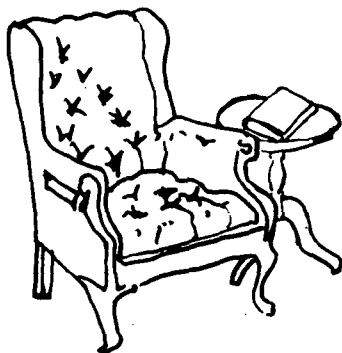
"But the plot thickened," suggested the armchair. "Enter love and the Reverend Bight. Mrs. Crawley wants to sell the house and sail off to China with him. This gives Cook an even stronger hold over her. She demands the house and all Mrs. Crawley has as the price of her silence. Mrs. Crawley kills her. But then she has to stand by and watch as the man she loves is convicted of the murder and executed."

"Mrs. Crawley took to port wine to drown her sorrows," said the sideboard, "as these many rings on my poor finish bear witness. She died of drink a few years later."

The furniture fell silent to contemplate this ironic conclusion. The only sound in the attic came from a yellow jacket which had earlier blundered into a canning jar in the bookcase and, hum as it might, couldn't blunder its way out again. With the foolish, hollow droning leading the way the furniture, piece by piece, dropped off into the deepest sleep. All except the armchair, which was kept awake by the weight of the detective's ghost.

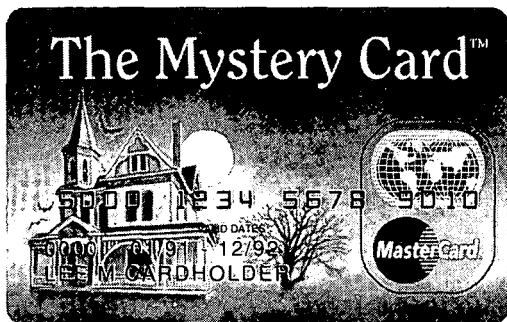
The specter sat there for a long time, thinking no doubt about the woman whose guilt his infatuated eyes had refused to see. The attic window framed a night filled with stars before the springs of the armchair gave out their final groan and the ghostly weight vanished, never to return.

The armchair felt sadness. But only for a moment. Sleep came quickly. The armchair dreamed its horsehair soul was running free again. It galloped long and hard, leaving the attic far behind. Suddenly it topped a rise. Down below, drinking from a stream, was a pretty little fiddle-back love seat with just a touch of upholstery on the back and bottom and four charming claw-and-ball feet. How mignon, thought the armchair. It whinnied. The love seat turned.



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TERRY MULLINS

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TWO LENGTHS AHEAD OF THE DEVIL

by TERRY MULLINS

Lupe Delores went to a racetrack for the first time with her aunt and uncle. Tio Juanito had become the first Cuban immigrant to own stock in the African-Hispanic Bank and *El Herald* took him and his family to Gulfstream Park along with the bank president and his family. Everyone had a grand time and bet on horses and lost. This seemed strange to Lupe, who saw other people losing too. What, she wondered, was the point of betting if you didn't win?

She kept her thoughts to herself. She didn't speak of it at school. There, she was friendly enough but when other girls swapped secrets, she listened and laughed and said little. On graduating, she got a job as librarian's assistant in the Cuban section of Miami and spent her spare time at racetracks studying horses, greyhounds, and people who knew how to make money betting on them.

She occasionally bet on a dog or horse she knew was going to win. She soon had a five-figure bank balance.

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For her the races meant people: jockeys who spoke only Spanish and flirted with her shamelessly, trainers who understood animals but could hardly communicate with people, owners who built up stables of horses with the devotion and dedication that old-world communities had once used to build cathedrals, and bettors who bought frustration at a low price in money but a high price in self-esteem. In her own detached way, Lupe loved them all.

Then she met Tarb Shingle, also known as The Needle because of a certain skill he had in encouraging racing animals to perform beyond their usual ability.

Lupe was not romantically attracted to Tarb. Few women were. He was a bit past middle age, had hair that looked like coffee with too much milk in it, and had as much sex appeal as a bowl of cold oatmeal.

After her first meeting with Tarb, she kept out of his sight and certainly out of his attention as much as possible. But she watched him from a distance. She learned his habits—which tracks he visited when, which jockeys he joked with, and which trainers knew him well enough to chase him away. Lupe shadowed him like a jealous lover and her winnings increased steadily.

This profitable routine came to an abrupt end at the height of the season at Hialeah. Tarb arrived at the track early and spent a couple hours speaking with the trainer of the favorite in the fifth race. Lupe was disappointed. His attention to favorites usually meant that they lost. She was interested in winners.

Nevertheless, she kept him in view and thus was watching when he disappeared into the stall of the horse next to the favorite. The horse was Delta Dreams, an also-ran in eight starts that year. Tarb didn't stay long and when he came out, he rejoined the favorite's jockey for a five-minute visit. That was what Lupe wanted to know. She checked the odds on Delta Dreams. Thirty to one. She headed for the betting window.

Ahead of her in line was a short, tubby man she had encountered often at the track. His name was Baxter Pockert and he was a retired tax assessor from Tallahassee. He and his wife Emma, whom Lupe had never met but pictured from his comments as a comfortable grandmother in the Norman Rockwell tradition, lived in a cottage they were buying in Homestead. Inflation had caught up with and passed his pension.

The comfort was gone from their living and they had to strain to meet payments on the cottage. His one luxury was playing the

horses. So far he had made it a fairly profitable luxury. He was a system player, which earned her pity. Today he seemed pleased with his success.

She greeted him as an old friend. "Good morning, Mr. Pockert. How's your luck holding out?"

"Pretty good, pretty good. I've had two winners. It isn't luck, though. It's substantive handicapping."

"Who do you like in the fifth?"

"Pobre Diablo."

"The favorite? *Qué lástima!* You'll never get rich backing the favorite."

"He has an average earning of eighty-five hundred this year. No one in the field can match him. Who do you like?"

Lupe usually didn't discuss her choices but she liked Pockert. She hoped that one day he'd get the cottage paid for and be able to live with Emma at ease. She pictured them sitting on the front porch in rocking chairs watching sunsets.

"Delta Dreams," she said.

"A thirty-to-one long shot with no wins! You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not. The odds will drop before the beginning of the race but you can still make a bundle by betting on him."

She knew what was in his mind. She had never been wrong before. He didn't stand to win much on the favorite. And he had his original roll plus two wins. On the other hand, he was committed to his system.

Lupe was fairly sure she knew what he would do. He would not bet on Pobre Diablo for fear of losing, but he wouldn't bet against his system either.

She was wrong. He gave her a mischievous grin and said, "Okay. I trust your judgment. I'll bet on Delta Dreams. How much are you betting?"

"A hundred dollars to win."

He looked thoughtful. By the time he reached the window, he had made up his mind. "Five hundred on Delta Dreams," he said.

Lupe was amazed and pleased. She placed her hundred-dollar bet and turned to continue their conversation, but Pockert was gone. He was probably on his way to the rail to wait for the start of the fifth race.

Delta Dreams ran at odds of eighteen-to-one. He finished two lengths ahead of Pobre Diablo and six lengths ahead of the field, the best race of his career.

Lupe saw a flushed and happy Pockert collect his money and head for the exit. Monday he'd probably be waiting for the bank to open so he could pay off his mortgage. She felt a warm feeling of self-congratulation. Her own winnings contributed to her satisfaction. All in all, the world was a pretty good place on warm cloudless days.

She felt she should take her own profits and go home. On her way out she saw Tarb. He didn't look as happy as he should have. She watched him leave the track and cross the parking lot. Halfway across he was met by two men who stood very still and spoke slowly.

Tarb was explaining something to them. He spoke faster and faster, waving his hands and apparently shouting. The men listened for a while and then led him to a long black car and drove him away.

That was the last she ever saw of Tarb.

Wednesday's paper carried an account of the police finding his body washed ashore below Surfside. He had been shot once in the head. The police were offering a reward for information.

Lupe shook her head. That was not the way she liked to make money.

She closed her eyes and recalled the scene in the parking lot. The two men had been dressed alike in business suits that contrasted with the casual wear of the crowd. One man had been large, taller and heavier than either Tarb or the other man. He looked sorrowful and spoke only once. The other, of average height but muscular, talked for both.

She had never seen either before but she would recognize them if she saw them again.

And so on that Wednesday afternoon, she sat in the library reading and re-reading the account in the newspaper. Early afternoons were quiet in the library. Morning saw a dozen or so retired brokers come in to make a dash for the *Wall Street Journal* or *Barron's*. Where they came from she did not know. None of them spoke Spanish. They didn't seem to speak very good English. Yet they poured into her branch of the library to read financial news. They undoubtedly knew one another but they seldom spoke anything more than "Are you finished with that section?" They read in silence for an hour or so and then left.

Young mothers on their way back from childcare centers constituted the rest of the morning's attendance, browsing among new releases, papers for Cuban exiles, and videos. Unlike the brokers, they talked with each other and the staff. They left before noon to return in late afternoon with their children. Late afternoon also

brought occasional groups of school children looking up material for homework assignments. But early afternoon was quiet. Lupe had time to reflect on Tarb's death and what it might mean for her.

She was glad that she had kept her distance from him. Still, she had trailed him fairly consistently. If others had been shadowing him, they might have noticed that she was always in the vicinity. If they had suspicious minds—and she did not doubt that they would have—they might wonder what she knew about Tarb, his activity, and his disappearance. It was not a comforting contemplation.

Thursday afternoon brought a shock. The morning paper followed up the Tarb killing with a long feature story. It had a lot of padding and was short on new facts, except one. The police were looking for a young woman thought to have witnessed Tarb's abduction!

It took her a while to figure that one out. Anyone who had seen her witness Tarb's abduction would also have seen Tarb abducted. So there were two witnesses, yet the story only mentioned the young woman.

Finally it came to her. The other witness was a detective. The police had been following Tarb. One of them had seen Tarb taken and had seen her watching. She shuddered. This was something she was going to avoid. If they had a detective following Tarb, he could tell them all they needed to know. They didn't need her.

That weekend she stayed away from the tracks, all of them. Her aunt and uncle were surprised to have her with them. She helped Tia Maria in the garden on Saturday and went to church on Sunday. It was relaxing and different. It was also safe.

She would stay away from the tracks for a while. She still had the library. For Lupe the library was much like the racetrack. It was a place where she could be with many people who did not pry. Both places focused attention away from one's self.

In the library attention was on books: young girls chattering over cheap romance novels, middle-aged women asking solemnly about books on astrology, teenage boys looking for sports magazines, teachers waiting to catch up on the *New York Times* bestseller selections.

At the racetrack it was dogs or horses: handicappers discussing claiming races and allowance events, owners wondering if their winning horses were good enough to carry two more pounds, trainers worrying over condition, and bettors expounding enthusiastically over their systems.

In neither case did anyone pester her with personal questions or personal confidences or suggestions: about boyfriends, about her parents in Cuba, about her health, about quitting the library and getting a corporate job with a future full of money and security, about changing her hair color or her makeup.

People in libraries and race tracks left you alone. They talked with you, but the atmosphere was so saturated with obvious concerns that no one had occasion to become confidential.

But Monday brought a second shock. Along with the retired stock-brokers, indeed ahead of them, was Mr. Pockert. He wanted to speak with her. He was not in a hurry but was willing to wait.

It was an especially busy morning and he had to wait for over an hour. Both of them were tense when she was finally free to talk with him.

"Miss Delores," he said, "the police have been questioning me about you. I thought you should know."

"Questioning you? Why?"

"They had been following Tarb Shingle before he was killed. They saw you spying on him, too, and they had a woman following you the day he was killed. She saw you talking with me. Last Saturday, that detective found me at the track and questioned me about you. I said you were just someone I met at the races and I didn't know anything about you. I didn't give them your name or tell them that you had mentioned working in the library. But I figured I'd better warn you."

"Thank you. I don't know anything about Tarb's death and I'd rather not deal with the police."

"That's what I thought."

"Thank you again. How's Emma?"

"She's fine. We've paid off our mortgage, thanks to you, and she is planning some heavy shopping with the money we've been paying on it."

"I'm glad." She paused and asked, "Do you think they may be following you?"

He smiled sheepishly and said, "I thought of that. There was a suspicious-looking man at the track yesterday. I left after the seventh race and didn't see him again. Today I haven't seen anything. I went to several places before I came here."

Pockert's news disturbed her more than the newspaper account had. She didn't want that nice old man to be involved in Tarb's death. She had felt real satisfaction at having helped him and his

wife clear their mortgage so they could enjoy retirement without having to count pennies. She didn't like the thought that anyone might bother them. But if the police associated Pockert with her, Tarb's killers might do the same. It didn't seem fair. You try to help someone and then something like this happens.

She could, of course, go to the police. That might get Pockert off the hook. Lupe looked at the idea from all angles. She didn't like it. She didn't know any police and her friends in the Cuban community distrusted them. Her every instinct was opposed to talking with the law. Tia Maria always said, "*En boca cerrada no entran moscas.*" Flies can't get in a closed mouth.

The next day, after the retired brokers had settled down to reading *Value Line* and the *Outlook*, Lupe was searching the computer for a reserved book when she saw the librarian directing a woman toward her.

The woman was about forty-three, a tall blond with a figure that was almost but not quite voluptuous. She wore fairly heavy make-up and expensive clothes. Lupe looked for jewelry and, to her surprise, found none. The woman approached and asked, "Miss Delores?"

"Yes."

"I am Emma Pockert."

Lupe hoped she did not look as stunned as she felt. The woman must be a quarter of a century younger than Pockert.

Emma Pockert gave a forced smile and then said in a worried voice, "Baxter has been kidnapped. I'm about as worried as I can be."

"Have you told the police?"

"That was the first thing I did. Two men rang our doorbell. Baxter answered it and they grabbed him and put him in a car and drove away. I called the police. They think the men who killed Tarb Shingle got Baxter, too."

"When did this happen?"

"Three hours ago. I was with the police for an hour. The past two hours I've been going crazy. That's why I came here. Baxter told me about you. We're both grateful to you. I know there's nothing you can do to help but I had to talk with someone. Is it all right if we talk in the library?"

"It's all right as long as we talk quietly. Did you see the men?"

"I saw them shoving Baxter into the car. They drove off in a large Buick, about two years old."

"Describe the men."

"One was a big man. The other was just average but strong. They wore dark-blue suits."

"What color was the car?"

"Black. After they pushed Baxter in the car, one of them walked around it and shouted something to the other one. It sounded like 'Flight.' I later came to the conclusion that it was 'Fight.' He must have said that Baxter put up quite a fight."

"Maybe. Or maybe not. If it was 'Flight' then they may have taken him to the airport. Do you have a car?"

"Yes."

"I'll take the day off. Let's go to the airport and look for him."

"Anything. It's awful just waiting and not doing anything to help."

So Lupe told the librarian that an emergency had arisen, and she and Emma headed for the airport in a sporty BMW.

"Nice car," Lupe said.

"Expensive, too," Emma replied. "We were having a hard time keeping up payments on it and the house. It looked as if one of them would have to go. Now we can keep them both."

She settled comfortably at the wheel, driving skillfully but not excessively fast, obviously feeling better now that she was in action. She still felt the need to talk, but her voice lacked the earlier tension.

"I'm Baxter's second wife," she said. "I was an actress. I met the first Mrs. Pockert in New York. I was buying groceries in a market in the Village and she recognized me and introduced herself. We became friends and I often visited with her and Baxter. They both took an interest in my career."

"I had been acting for six years by then. I was a good actress but not a smart one. I wound up giving good performances in lousy plays. The only good roles I had were in revivals."

"Sounds like bad luck," Lupe said. "I know a jockey who's the same way. He's a great jockey who never gets a decent horse. One year he had only eight winners, all of them horses that wouldn't have been in the money with any other rider aboard."

"Thanks, but there's no reason why a good actress should take a bad part. I just couldn't sense the potential in a play. Anyway, I was playing one of my good roles, the mother in *Glass Menagerie*, when Mrs. Pockert died."

"Baxter was broken up. They had seen the play the night before she died. She had liked it a lot.

"After that, Baxter attended every performance until the play closed. He would come by for me after the final curtain and take me to a night club. We were married three months later and left New York for good."

"Do you ever miss the stage?"

"Sometimes I miss the little things about that sort of life, but I never miss the stage itself. Repeating the same words night after night—for months if you're lucky! I never liked it. Going through the same action at the same pace. Timing is everything and each person has to perform each action at just the right time. I never could act automatically. I was always conscious of what I was doing and what I was saying. At times I felt like a prisoner. When you are on stage, you have no freedom. Yes, I miss some things, but I'd never go back."

Traffic became heavy and conversation paused. Lupe had time to wonder about Mrs. Pockert. For the first time she doubted the wisdom of what she was doing. She had no proof that this woman was Emma Pockert.

Lupe looked at the older woman and contrasted this shapely, worldly wise person with the picture she had formed of Pockert's wife. She tried to remember what Pockert had actually said about Emma. He had often talked about her, but he never said what she looked like or what she liked to do or anything else about her. She was just his wife. He talked about things they did or wanted or hoped for but those things were really what he thought. Lupe had been left to fill in the blanks and she had made Emma a sort of female counterpart of Pockert.

This could be Emma Pockert driving them to the airport to rescue her husband. Or it could be a member of the gang that killed Tarb Shingle and kidnaped Pockert.

Although Lupe did not know all of Miami, she did know the way from Calle Ocho to the airport, the kennel clubs, and the racetracks. So far the woman claiming to be Emma was driving swiftly and knowledgeably toward Miami International Airport. Ten minutes later they drove into the airport parking lot and Lupe put her suspicions aside.

Emma said, "We'll start at one end of the airport and go through to the other. Never mind shops or the International Transit Lounge.

We can't hope to cover everything, just where there are local passengers waiting."

They kept each other in sight but stayed apart, walking fast. They had covered about a fourth of the airport when Mrs. Pockert signalled Lupe. The two of them met at a television monitor and pretended to be checking arrival and departure times.

"He's over in the corner," Emma said, "slumped down in a seat beside the big man in a blue suit."

Lupe looked and saw him. The man beside him was one of the two who had kidnapped Tarb, the larger of the two.

"They must be waiting to go on a TAN-Honduras flight," Lupe said.

"Probably, but in any case Baxter's being taken against his will. I'm sure he's drugged."

"What should we do?"

"Call the police, of course. I'll stay here and watch. If they try to leave, I'll make a scene. You go call. There's a phone in the baggage claim area."

That triggered Lupe's suspicions again. They had found Pockert with amazing ease, considering the size of the airport. And the woman knew just where to send her for a pay phone. That didn't ring true. The monitor indicated that there had been no flight in on TAN-Honduras for hours and none was scheduled for another hour and a half. The crowded airport seemed like the safest place in the world. She should suspect nothing. But the baggage claim area would be deserted and shut off from view. Lupe felt strangely uneasy.

She made her way through the crowd slowly. When she was sure she was out of sight of the other woman, she slipped into a souvenir shop. "May I use your phone?" she asked. "I've got to call the police."

The clerk was startled but cooperative. They had a telephone and she could use it. He stood nearby to make sure she was calling the police. Lupe was reassured.

El Herald had reported that a Lieutenant O'Claire was in charge of the Tarb Shingle murder. She asked for him.

"Lieutenant, I'm calling from International Airport. The men who abducted Tarb Shingle have got Baxter Pockert here. He's near the TAN-Honduras ticket counter. A middle-aged blond woman who claims to be Emma Pockert is watching."

"Who is this?"

"That's all I know. You'd better get to him in a hurry."

She hung up.

The clerk was looking at her with slack jaw and bulging eyes. He would give a good description of her, but that couldn't be helped. She thanked him and got out of the shop as quickly as she could. She worked her way through the press of people until she reached a sandwich bar which gave her a fairly good view of both Emma and Pockert. The woman was keeping an eye on him, all right. Once or twice the man with Pockert looked at the woman. Lupe felt they were in it together.

After what seemed like weeks, the police arrived. They came from three different directions. The large man saw them first, got up briskly, and began to walk away. They stopped him and marched him back to Pockert, who responded to their shaking with a feeble attempt to rise. The police helped him away.

Other police were moving through the crowd, apparently looking for the blond woman. She had disappeared. Lupe knew that if they talked with the clerk, they would be looking for her, too. She tried to appear interested only in her sandwich cubano and found that she had already eaten half of it.

She finished it and scanned the crowd. She did not see either the blond or the police. She edged into a slow-moving mass of people churning toward the exit door. That was when she felt a sharp pain in her arm. Even before she could wonder what it was, she began to feel weak. She was quite helpless by the time the muscular man in a blue suit supported her with his arm and plowed their way out into the street.

A long black car pulled up and she was helped firmly into the back seat. The car accelerated and they passed swiftly from airport traffic into city traffic.

There were three men in the car with her. Muscles was beside her in the back seat. The other two were in the front seat. They sounded a long way off.

One asked, "How is she?"

"Out cold."

Lupe realized that not only was she not out cold, but she was less helpless than she had been. The effect of the drug had reached its climax without rendering her unconscious. She was in a half dream and half fantasy state. Very, very slowly it seemed to be wearing off and events took on more and more reality. She lay still and waited. When they opened the door, she might have a chance to escape.

She didn't. They parked before a house and both men from the front of the car stood beside the door and opened it. The neighborhood was silent. The men were sure. They carried her to a room upstairs and threw her on a bed.

"Think we should tie her up?"

"Naw. She ain't goin' anyplace. She'll be out for at least an hour."

They left the light on but closed the door and walked back downstairs. They had not locked the door, of that she was sure. But the door had squeaked loudly. It would warn them if she tried to open it.

Lupe eased herself off the bed and tried to stand. She was still weak. After several attempts, she made it. With one hand touching the bed for support, she began to explore the room. Walking proved easier than standing.

She found a dresser and opened one of two top drawers. It contained boxes of cartridges. She opened it all the way but found no pistol.

She opened the other top drawer. It held only handkerchiefs, a can opener, and a black plastic device which looked like a beeper. She held it to her ear but heard nothing. There was a single button in the middle.

Before she could investigate further, she heard one of the men shout, "Cops are headed this way. I heard them on shortwave. One car is here already and is calling for backup. They're probably watching the Buick out front, but the Toyota in the garage is wired."

"Forget the Buick. Disconnect the Toyota. We'll take that. Get the girl and bring her to the garage."

Lupe put the black box to her ear and pushed the button. Instead of voices, she heard and felt a tremendous explosion. The house shook as if an earthquake had struck.

Her one thought was to get out. She opened the door and found the whole front of the house was gone. From below there rose smoke and fire. The flames increased as she watched. She looked for back stairs and found what was left of them. There were no bannisters. There was not even a wall on the left for the bottom half.

Halfway down she had to begin testing each step, or what was left of a step, to make sure it would hold. Some of them gave a bit but all held her weight. She could feel the heat of fire as it began to engulf the whole building.

The back door had been blown off. She ran out into the open and was grabbed by a police officer.

She never completely lost consciousness. They drove her to a hospital where three doctors examined her and talked about shock. One found the needle mark on her arm and began testing her eyes.

Finally, two of them stepped back and the other spoke to her. "You have had a rough time but it could have been worse. Lieutenant O'Claire has been asking to speak with you. Do you feel up to it?"

She thought she felt fine and said so in Spanish. For some reason, she could not find the English words. One of the other doctors stepped forward and picked up the conversation. She said that she was feeling better. She had been drugged in the airport but that had almost worn off. Then she found her English again and said, "Yes, you may send the officer in."

O'Claire was a man of medium build, tough looking but with a friendly manner.

"How was it?" he asked.

"It was awful. Mostly I knew what was going on but there was no connection between one event and the next. Improbable things happened and seemed to be normal. It was like a story by Garcia Marquez. I don't think I'll be able to read magical realism again any time soon."

He seemed to understand. He also seemed satisfied not to press for details. She liked him for that. If he needed information to solve a crime, he probably could be ruthless, but this case was solved and he didn't exercise any useless curiosity. Cop or not, she decided he was a nice man.

After a few more words of reassurance, he said, "Mrs. Pockert saw the man take you out of the terminal. She hailed a cruising police car and they tracked you across town. I got there in time to see the house explode."

"She really is his wife, then?"

"Mrs. Pockert? Yes. She's here with him now. He's all right but both of you will have to spend a few more hours under observation. The doctors are running tests to find out what was used to drug you."

"Have her come in. I want to thank her."

Emma Pockert came in, hugged Lupe, and said, "Honey, I was never so glad to see anything as I was to see you come running out of that house. I couldn't think of anything but what Baxter said about Delta Dreams—'He was running two lengths ahead of the devil.' " ●

DETECTIVERSE



ON VIEWING THE OLIVIER VERSION OF THE TRAGEDY OF RICHARD III FOR THE THIRD TIME

by NEIL CAMERON

Richard the Third was a sinister bird,
He was twisted both outside and in,
He plotted and schemed, and his eyes brightly gleamed
At prospects of new ways to sin.

Plantagenet heirs were dispatched to dark lairs,
And mangled, or strangled, or drowned,
All ethics disdained, the kingdom he gained,
Old Richard was really a hound.

His nemesis came at the end of the game,
From Richmond, the great Prince of Wales,
At Bosworth he fell (first attempting to sell
His crown for some horseflesh, but fails).

We ought to detest this miserable pest,
And cheer at his final demise,
But with the performance of brilliant Sir Lawrence,
His end brings a tear to our eyes.

BUT THEN—

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DETECTIVERSE

ON READING THE DAUGHTER OF TIME FOR THE THIRD TIME AS WELL

by NEIL CAMERON

The hardened thug winces
At murdering princes,
Yet two met their end in the Tower.
We blame Uncle Dick. But are we too quick,
In our curse of Plantagenet power?

A thoughtful Inspector,
Reviewing the sector,
Finds Richard was gentle, not hard,
And raises the roof, on finding no proof,
Acceptable to Scotland Yard.

He found Morton and More
Laid the crime at Dick's door,
With nothing much more than a guess,
Preferring a story less truthful than gory
To please the two Henrys and Bess.

So Miss Josephine Tey
Gives Richard his day,
Removes him from his endless night;
One no more supposes the Wars of the Roses
Were ended with everything right.

It is no easy trick
To find the real Dick,
Or determine just where the guilt lay;
Whoever was hateful, we all must be grateful
To Shakespeare and Josephine Tey.

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a **NEW** short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Cynthia didn't have the objectivity to keep her creation at a distance. Nowadays she regaled Ray with the adorable things she could imagine the superintendent saying, the wonderfully chivalrous things she could imagine him doing. He was here in this house, the figure on its carpet. Superintendent Cockayne! He'd like to have him up before a disciplinary board! He'd like to have him drummed out of the Force for taking bribes! He'd like to murder him!

Another scintillating entertainment from one of the genre's wit-tiest writers . . .

THE MAN IN HER LIFE

by ROBERT BARNARD

“He’s up there with her now,” Ray Brodie thought, his eyes flicking involuntarily to the ceiling. “What is he doing? Talking about his bloody water-colours, I shouldn’t wonder. Those sensitive water-colours of Normandy and Brittany that he does in his snatched summer holidays and exhibits—where else?—at the Royal Academy. Or perhaps he’s standing there, all six foot two of him, with the shoulders of a rugby prop forward, still as fit as when he got his blue at Balliol. Or perhaps he’s stroking that adorable brown moustache that gives him something of the dashing air of a Byronic corsair. Is he reminiscing about past cases, perhaps? Or elucidating some particularly puzzling ambiguity about this one? Superintendent Cockayne, my arse! Not Cockaigne, still less Cocain, but Cockayne, with a y and an e. Lovely and upper-crust looking! Though of course he’s wonderful at dealing with the lower orders. No won-

© 1992 by Robert Barnard.

der—his family has had them as slaveys for generations. Probably at this moment Cynthia can feel his breath on her face, is longing to feel his hands on her shoulders, her breasts, her . . .”

He pulled himself up. No point in thinking about it. No point at all. But he had been thinking about it on and off all day at school. Thinking about it for months. About his wife, back here all day, alone with her detective.

It had all been a great giggle when the first book had been accepted. He'd enjoyed her pleasure, taking pride in it. He'd read the book and thought it rather good—not Jane Austen or Charles Dickens, the authors he spent his days teaching, but jolly superior tosh. He'd sometimes supplied her with literate and civilised things for the superintendent to say, because Cynthia hadn't had his education. Perhaps that was the problem: she wasn't trained in literature. She didn't have the objectivity to keep her creation at a distance. Nowadays she regaled him with the adorable things she could imagine him saying, the wonderfully chivalrous things she could imagine him doing. He was here in this house, the figure on its carpet. Superintendent Cockayne! He'd like to have him up before a disciplinary board! He'd like to have him drummed out of the Force for taking bribes! He'd like to murder him!

He heard footsteps on the landing. Now Cynthia would bounce down the stairs, whistle Wimsey the dog, shout, “Shan't be long,” and bang the front door. Cynthia bounced down the stairs, whistled Wimsey the dog, shouted, “Shan't be long,” and banged the front door. How predictable writers were! How wedded to their routines! Now he did what he always did: went up to read what she had written.

As he snuck up the stairs (why should he skulk in his own house?) he reflected on poor Wimsey, burdened with the name of Cockayne's dog. What right had Cynthia to load an innocent beast with all the burdens of such a comparison. Cockayne's Wimsey was brought in for the occasional sentimental night piece, and he must have been very irregularly walked and fed, a policeman's hours being what they were. A case for the RSPCA perhaps?

The word processor was still switched on. Perhaps Cynthia expected further inspiration that day.

“Cockayne looked at Clarissa with great compassion, a look that was tinged with tenderness.”

Oh Christ! Couldn't one just imagine that look? And imagine Cynthia imagining herself the object of it?

"‘My dear,’ he said, ‘you are still young.’" (My god! She’s caught in a time warp! How often had poor old Poirot said precisely that? Usually adding "Time heals all.") "‘What you are suffering now will only be a memory in a year’s time—a sad one, certainly, but one that will seem to be from a former life. Trust me. I know. Time heals all.’"

Ray switched off the machine in disgust. Then he switched it on again. "The heart has wonderful powers of recuperation" were the words he saw before he fled downstairs. Cockayne in his "wise father" mood was Cockayne at his most odious. And, apparently, his most repetitious. Like most word processor users Cynthia had got into the habit of saying the same thing over and over again.

At dinner that night Cynthia was unusually chatty.

"I’m meditating a cat for Cockayne—won’t that be sweet?"

"I always thought that dog could never be exercised properly."

"Someone comes and walks him," said Cynthia coldly. "Several times a day. What do you think I should call her?"

"Nine tails? Knowing Neville Cockayne’s politics he’s probably in favour of bringing it back."

"I remember the time," said Cynthia, speaking very distinctly, "when you actually liked Cockayne."

And it was true. He had had touches of Alleyn, touches of Dalgliesh. He had seemed a very promising commercial proposition. Yes, dammit, he had *liked* him!

"I change my opinion, even of my friends," he said.

And there he was, talking of Cockayne as if he were a human being.

By the next evening Cynthia had decided on the cat’s name.

"Cockayne thinks he’ll call it Rasputin," she said.

"I thought you said it was female," said Ray.

"Cats are so difficult. It’s turned out to be male."

"I can’t see Cockayne coping with all those tomcat odours," said Brodie.

"He can be de-sexed."

"Hardly, if he is to be called Rasputin."

Cynthia thought.

"What are the names of some of the great castrati?"

"Farinelli. Senesino."

"Farinelli might do. It has the right cultural touch. Or we can call him Rasputin and simply ignore the tomcat odours. People might

complain about Cockayne having him de-sexed. They're awfully touchy about everything he does."

Because they're in love with him, just as you are, thought Ray.

In the days that followed, Ray picked up the occasional mention of kittens on the word processor. One of the characters in *Persons Unknown* had a cat that was about to have a litter. The character was described as an "intelligent, independent-minded woman, of little education but great insight"—now who would *that* character be based on? Some way on Cockayne delivered his verdict on cats: "Wonderful creatures, cats. Totally their own man. Don't give a damn about the rest of the world." Oh yeah? thought Ray. And muss up against your legs, purring, at feeding time. But no doubt macho man was going to have a macho cat.

The cat began to appear in Cynthia's notebooks. "Tortoiseshell, with white waistcoat"; "end with accepting kitten", amended to: "No—end with C., Wimsey, and Rasputin." These notes were all in the *Persons Unknown* notebook. But Rasputin had begun to appear as well in the general notebook, where ideas for future novels and stories were recorded. "Rasputin and the starlings"; "Rasputin and cufflinks." The kitten seemed set to take part in a series of coy vignettes, the literary equivalent of low-grade Victorian genre-painting, and just as nauseating.

As the writing of *Persons Unknown* neared its end, a new note appeared in the references to Rasputin (Farinelli had appeared in the notebooks and had been discarded as inappropriately effete). The general notebook asked, "Rasputin to have role?" Oh no! thought Ray, not another detective cat! But then a cluster of notes suggested, "Murderer visits C.'s flat?" and then, "C. rescuing Rasputin? How? What doing?" Ray thought he was soon going to be disliking that bloody cat as much as he disliked Cockayne. But the notes had put an idea into his head.

Next evening at dinner Cynthia was rather preoccupied. No doubt she was sorting out ways of resolving *Persons Unknown*—probably some question of the quickest way of getting across London using public transport, which was her version of the old railway timetable play. Ray himself sat eating and concentrating. Over the years—particularly over the years when they were closer, before Cockayne had come between them—he and Cynthia had developed a sort of empathy, as so many married couples do. They had known, without discussing it, where they wanted to go on holiday next year, what colours they wanted the dining room to be redecorated in. Now

Ray concentrated, trying to extend that empathy. "Cockayne dies defending kitten," he thought, harder and harder. "Cockayne shot to save kitten." "Cockayne sacrifices himself for kitten." The thought "All for Love or The World Well Lost for a Kitten" flashed into his mind, but he suppressed his native sarcasm and got back to thinking in Cynthia's terms. "The supreme sacrifice . . . the impulse of a moment . . . the action was quintessentially Cockayne."

At one point he saw Cynthia start.

The idea, once put into her head, was resisted. It was five days before Ray found in the general notebook, underlined, the title *Cockayne's Last Case*???

He did not, of course, press the subject in conversation. Let the idea germinate. The title in itself had to be an attraction. It would cause a polite sensation among Cockayne's fans—regular rail-travellers, retired clergymen, American mid-West matrons. Five weeks after the title had been recorded, with question marks, in the general notebook Ray's heart leapt up to see a new notebook on Cynthia's desk. On the front, denuded of queries, was the title *Cockayne's Last Case*.

Cynthia seemed unsure as yet what this last case would consist of, except that, unusually for her, it was to stray into the world of organised crime. Cynthia, like most British writers, preferred the domestic. Now there were notes like "drugs?" "IRA?" and "bullion raids?" But the ending was beginning to take shape in her mind. Cockayne holed up and held up in his elegant Dolphin Square flat. "Definitely gun," she had written.

The kitten incident was as yet vague in her mind. Deciphering the odd scrappy notes, Ray concluded that, while Cockayne was held up at gun-point by a mobster in his own flat, the kitten irritated the man by playing on the mantelpiece. It was when it toppled a china ornament to the floor that the gangster turned the gun on the kitten, at which point Cockayne leapt on him and received the bullet in his stomach. It all sounded a bit feeble to Ray, but he had to admit that ideas that began by sounding feeble in Cynthia's notes often ended up effective and convincing in the finished book. She was a real professional.

It was almost a month later that Cynthia made her announcement at dinner:

"I think I'm going to kill off Cockayne."

Ray's heart leapt, but he kept his voice as neutral as possible.

"Good idea. You need someone more modern. There's a whole new, young audience out there. Get someone young and tough, a cop in some gritty place like Birmingham or Glasgow, give him a live-in partner he's not married to, have him like jazz, give him financial worries, a mortgage he can't keep up with, have him at war with his superiors. Drag yourself into the modern world."

It was not very tactfully put, this last bit. Cynthia said nothing, but Ray hoped she was meditating on what he had said. He would certainly be less jealous of a young cop with a live-in girlfriend.

It was a week or so later that Cynthia said:

"Who was it who said a writer gains all his essential experiences by the time he is twenty-five?"

"Oh Lord, I don't know. Why?"

"Well, it's funny, but I'm beginning to feel that I know more about Britain in the fifties and sixties than I do about Britain today."

"Inevitable, I suppose. Since you've become a writer you've spent most of your time shut away in that study. You've got a bit out of touch."

"Yes . . . It's going to be wonderful going back to that time again."

"Back?—"

"Yes. I've decided to do all the early cases of Neville Cockayne. Start with him in uniform—he must have looked wonderful. Then the early years with the CID, and the cases where he really made his mark and convinced his superiors that this had to be the coming man at the Yard. I can have him involved with the political scandals of the sixties, showing how incorruptible he is even under political pressures. And of course there'll be love affairs—I've thought of just the woman for him, but I won't describe her because you'll only say she's me. I'll show him rising step by step in the hierarchy, and I'll show how that tremendous tenacity and integrity was honed . . ."

As his wife bumbled on, her eyes liquid and shining at the prospects before her, Ray Brodie realized that there was only one way he was ever going to kill off Superintendent Cockayne.



THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Two of the best new mystery series to debut in the 1970s were James McClure's accounts of South African detectives Tromp Kramer and Mickey Zondi, beginning with 1971's *The Steam Pig*, and Michael Z. Lewin's novels about self-effacing Indianapolis private eye Albert Samson, beginning in the same year with *Ask the Right Question*. Besides sharing the same year of origin, both series have been on hiatus since 1984, and both have made welcome comebacks in 1991.

**** James McClure: *The Song Dog*, Mysterious, \$17.95. Some readers may be slightly disappointed that the ninth Kramer-Zondi novel is a prequel to the rest of the series, set in the early sixties and involving the team's first meeting, rather than a novel that examines the changes in South African society of recent years. But the telling, social observation, and puzzle-making are strong as ever. The crime is the death-by-explosion of two people, one an Afrikaner detective not so different from Kramer himself.

*** Michael Z. Lewin: *Called by a Panther*, Mysterious, \$17.95. Albert Samson is a fairly-early example both of the Regional private eye (i.e., one who doesn't occupy the usual urban locales of L.A., San Francisco, New York, or Chicago) and the comic private eye, bucking the conventions of the genre for humorous effect. His seventh case

finds him reluctantly involved in some undignified ventures (acting as sleuth at a society murder party and advertising his services on TV) while looking into the activities of a group of feminist terrorist non-bombers called the Scum Front. The last chapter will leave you wondering what awaits Samson in his next case.

**** Thomas H. Cook: *Evidence of Blood*, Putnam, \$19.95. A category of sleuth neither amateur nor official, the true-crime writer has provided protagonists of several recent novels. The latest example is Jack Kinley, who returns to his Georgia hometown for the funeral of boyhood friend Ray Tindall and is drawn into retracing Ray's steps in the investigation of a decades-old murder case. The account is fascinating and reaffirms Cook's place as one of the top current mystery writers.

**** Julie Smith: *The Axeman's Jazz*, St. Martin's, \$19.95. In her second book-length case, New Orleans policewoman Skip Langdon searches for a serial strangler who (in his love for jazz and his Jack-the-Ripper-like letter-writing proclivities) invites comparison with the city's Axeman of seventy-plus years ago—and who seems to have some connection with the various twelve-step recovery programs active in the community. Smith's first Langdon novel, *New Orleans Mourning* (1990), was a deserving

Edgar winner, and this one, proving again a pure whodunit need not fake character to surprise, is at least as good.

**** Ruth Rendell: *The Copper Peacock and Other Stories*, Mysterious, \$17.95. As no *EQMM* reader needs to be told, Ruth Rendell is one of the best writers ever of crime short stories. This latest collection is slim but rewarding with nine stories, most of which have appeared in these pages, one of them featuring her police detectives Wexford and Burden, the rest non-series and consistently off-trail and original. Rendell is often subtle and never insults her reader's intelligence, so these tales demand a careful reading.

*** Gerald Hammond: *Let Us Prey*, St. Martin's, \$15.95. The series about Scottish gunsmith Keith Calder is an unusual one in the current market: pure classical (even cosy) detection with a decidedly masculine ambiance, much concerned with hunting and firearms lore. Elderly solicitor Ralph Enterkin is one of the few pure (i.e. narrating) Watson characters still extant. The latest brief, low-key, neatly plotted entry concerns the murder of a gamekeeper who may have been contemplating illegal poisoning of birds of prey.

*** Michael Bowen: *Fielder's Choice*, St. Martin's, \$16.95. In 1962, charming hustler Jerry Fielder is murdered in the Polo Grounds press box during a New York Met game, to which he has invited a promising selection of suspects including married sleuthing team Thomas and Sandrine

Curry. The exhaustive explanation of baseball scoring in the early chapters suggests a major clue must lie therein, but the details of business, law, and the general period, plus the author's usual flair for prose and plot, commend this to a wider audience than baseball fans.

*** Miriam Borgenicht: *No Duress*, St. Martin's, \$15.95. Linda Stewart, a counselor of teenagers, is in the process of adopting a baby girl she has cared for since birth—but when the biological mother unaccountably changes her mind, Linda must turn over the baby. Mother and baby are found murdered, and Linda is determined to find out what happened. This is another strong book, with a neat puzzle and undeniable human interest, from one of the longest-standing (debuted in 1949!) and most under-valued writers in the genre. The novel finishes with an unresolved question that could be answered in a sequel—or, maybe better (and more likely from a writer who has shunned series characters), left to the reader to decide.

*** Ellis Peters: *The Summer of the Danes*, Mysterious, \$16.95. The eighteenth Brother Cadfael novel is below average for the series but still an entertaining enough work of historical fiction, with much detail of medieval seafaring and warfaring. There is a murder by unknown hand, but the detective element is very slight with Cadfael more onlooker than investigator.

*** Donald Dewey: *Reasonable Doubts*, St. Martin's, \$19.95. This

enthraling and suspenseful first novel is a sort of courthouse *Grand Hotel*, following the lives of five people concerned with the Queens, New York, burglary trial of Manuel Torres: the defendant himself, his female defense lawyer, a terminally-ill juror, a mentally quirky courthouse guard, and a cynical elevator operator. The reader is constantly led to expect more fireworks than a mere verdict, but few will guess exactly what form they will take.

The publishing firm of Carroll & Graf is to be congratulated for its contributions to mystery fiction in recent years. Their numerous distinguished anthologies include the latest gathering of stories from this magazine, *Scarlet Letters* (\$18.95), edited by Eleanor Sullivan and featuring Robert Barnard, Simon Brett, Clark Howard, Patricia McGerr, Ruth Rendell, and Julian Symons among a strong roster of sixteen contributors; and *Dark Crimes* (\$21.95), edited by Ed Gorman and billed as the first in an annual series gathering "Great Noir Fiction from the forties to the nineties"—the generous volume includes nineteen short stories by writers like Lawrence Block, Robert Bloch, John Lutz, Max Allan Collins, and Marcia Muller, plus complete novels by fifties paperback original writers Gil Brewer and Peter Rabe.

Carroll & Graf's efforts to bring high-quality mystery fiction of past years back into print include their several hardcover volumes of Erle Stanley Gardner pulp stories and paperback reprints like Henry

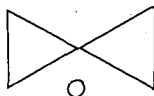
Farrell's fine 1960 chiller of aging show-biz sisters, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (\$3.95), memorably filmed with Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. They also have imported some notable secondary sources, such as Peter Costello's *The Real World of Sherlock Holmes: The True Crime Casebooks of Arthur Conan Doyle* (\$19.95), the most thorough treatment yet of Doyle's interest in and occasional solution of real-life crimes; and the first American publication of the delightful *100 Great Detectives* (\$18.95), a collection of tantalizing appreciations of favorite fictional sleuths, edited by Maxim Jakubowski and including among its contributors Edward D. Hoch, Bill Pronzini, Julian Symons, Sharyn McCrumb, Susan Dunlap, and numerous other distinguished writers and critics.

A Carroll & Graf project less worthy of praise, though, is a clear case of mislabeling. After Margery Allingham's death in 1966, her husband and sometime collaborator Youngman Carter wrote two additional Albert Campion novels, *Mr. Campion's Farthing* (1969) and *Mr. Campion's Quarry* (1970), the latter appearing a year after his own death. While both books were originally published under Carter's name, with no pretext of Allingham's involvement beyond some preliminary discussions of the plots, C&G are now offering them as Allingham's own work, which is something like publishing one of Robert Goldsborough's Nero Wolfe pastiches as having been written by Rex Stout.

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Martin Naparstek teaches creative writing and literature at Empire State College in Rochester, New York. He was a winner of the Book-of-the-Month Club's creative writing competition for 1969, judged by William Styron and Ralph Ellison, and has been listed in the "Outstanding Writers" section of the Pushcart Prize. Although two of Mr. Naparstek's novels have been published by Leisure Books, this is his debut in mystery fiction—an event in which we are happy to be able to share . . .

THE 9:13

by MARTIN NAPARSTECK

A fist slammed into the back of the head of the man wearing the dark-blue uniform, and he muttered incoherently as his legs weakened, and he crumbled to his knees and slumped backward. His head hit the concrete floor, impacting only inches from where the fist had hit.

The man standing wondered briefly if the one in the uniform was dead, but he didn't know how to tell if anyone was dead, and in truth, he knew, he really didn't care. He had more important things to concern himself with: how to get out of the building, how to get off of the grounds, how to get out of the city.

Only four eastbound passenger trains a day pass through Rochester. Years ago there were up to a dozen. Of the four still running, three pick up, on a typical run, about two dozen passengers. The fourth, which originates in Toronto and goes through Syracuse and Albany on its way to Boston, is scheduled to arrive in Rochester at 9:13 P.M., but it is often delayed at the border at Buffalo by customs officials. Not many years ago the customs officials took only ten or fifteen minutes to question the passengers and make a few spot checks—haphazard checks really—of luggage. But now there are drugs and international terrorists and God knows what else, and the customs people are more thorough, more questioning, more sus-

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picious. Amtrak builds twenty minutes into the schedule for the customs delay. It has taken up to three hours.

People in Rochester familiar with the unpredictability of the delays avoid the 9:13. On a bitter January night, with a foot or more of powdery snow, there were just two passengers—both men—in the Rochester Amtrak station waiting for the 9:13. The Gulf War was two weeks old and the front pages of the three newspapers that could be purchased from vending machines in the station were dominated by news of the war: a demonstration in downtown Rochester protesting President Bush's decision to go to war was met by another larger turnout of his supporters. The 15,000th sortie had been flown; parts of the Gulf were covered with an oil slick. In the afternoon *Times-Union* there was also, on page one, just below the war, a follow-up on the two-day-old Super Bowl. The only non-war news on the front page of the *Democrat & Chronicle* was an interview with a defensive safety who played fifty-seven seconds in the game. The *New York Times* had no Rochester news at all. No wonder the story about the escape was on page six of the second section of the *D&C* and not in either of the other papers.

One of the men in the station picked up a copy of the morning paper that someone had left on one of the back-and-backside-shaped chairs. The chair was a soft blue, almost a non-color. The man sat in it, facing a large window that separated him from the dark, invisible tracks. He saw his own reflection and that of the other man, who was in a seat that faced away from the window, although it was in the same row as his. He flipped carelessly through the paper. He had a vague sense of searching for the crossword puzzle, but he wasn't certain he would do it if he found it. He saw the story about the escape on the bottom of a page. The headline said, "Possible Escape From Home for Disturbed." The story was only about four inches long, and at first the man wasn't going to read it, but then he realized that he wasn't interested, not really, in the crossword puzzle, and that he was tired of reading about the war, of hearing about it on TV and radio. He had no idea how long he would have to wait for the 9:13, and so he read it. It was an act of acceptance, nothing more. The article said:

An incident late last night at the Western New York Residence for Adults in Need of Supervision may have resulted in the escape of one or more individuals, according to city police.

The home, known until a decade ago as the Rochester Institute for the Criminally Insane, refused through a spokeswoman to acknowledge that the incident occurred.

City police, however, did confirm that they were investigating a fight between staff members and some residents of the home and said that a count of residents showed that at least one resident was unaccounted for. The spokeswoman said that that information was incorrect and that the count was not yet complete.

The home is known to house at least several persons found not-guilty of murder charges because of insanity.

The man did not make conscious note of the story, but its details did lodge themselves in his subconscious. He was a large man, big enough to be an offensive lineman on a college football team. His hands were enormous; once he had held six baseballs in one of them. His face was broad, with a mouth that seemed to extend its full width, but his teeth were small, and that bothered him, so he seldom smiled. He still had his first set of teeth; he was the victim, a dentist once told him, of a defective gene, and he was required to brush his teeth five times a day and visit a dentist every third month. The plan had so far worked, for he was in his forties and had not yet lost his baby teeth.

"Who are you?" the other man said. His tone was sharp, uninviting, almost demanding.

"What? You talking to me?"

"Nobody else to talk to, is there? Who are you? What's your name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just asking. Just trying to be friendly. Don't you like to be friendly?"

"Why don't you leave me alone?"

There was about fifteen feet between the two men.

"My name is Thunder. They call me Thunder."

"Thunder? Like in the wind and stuff?"

"That's right, Thunder. What's your name?"

The man with the big hands and small teeth did not answer for several seconds, for a length of time that to him seemed enormous, and he didn't know if he wanted to answer or not. But without really making a decision, he said, "Joe." He said it softly; loud enough to hear at fifteen feet, but soft enough to expose his timidity.

"Joe? Oh." Then the man who had started the conversation turned away and looked at the window, toward the tracks that were hidden

by the darkness beyond the windows. The clock on the wall opposite the window said 9:47.

A squealing, a few clicks, then a disinterested voice from the ceiling: "The nine-thirteen from Toronto to Syracuse, Albany, Boston, and points in between has been delayed; expected estimated time of arrival now ten-nineteen."

"Shoot," said Thunder. He stood and walked to the counter but couldn't see anyone behind it. He tipped his head in an unsuccessful attempt to see into an office, but the door was open less than two inches. Thunder walked to the group of vending machines near the station's entrance. He took a dollar bill from his pocket and put it into a dollar-changing machine, but the machine refused to accept it. It pulled the dollar in three-quarters of the way, paused, then pushed it out. Thunder put the bill on top of the machine, ironed it with his fingertips, and reinserted it, but the machine rejected it again. "Shoot," he said; he spoke loudly but with an air of glee. "You got change?" he asked, still looking at the machine. When he didn't get an answer he turned quickly, his full body swiveling in near-military fashion, and spoke the sentence again—"You got change?"—but this time there was a clear demand in the tone, and a hint of annoyance. A third time, this time snapping, almost threatening: "You got change?"

Joe turned his head, but his body remained almost rigid. "No, no, I don't have any change. I don't, I really don't."

Thunder snickered softly. "No need to get hyper, mister. I was just asking. Look, tell you what, you got some change I can buy you a soda. Pepsi. That's what they got. No Coke. Got orange and root beer and Diet Pepsi. I can put the dollar in the soda machine and get change, but I got to buy a soda, and I don't want soda. I want a pack of peanuts and that's sixty cents and the candy machine don't take dollar bills, so if you give me—" he paused for a moment—"you give me thirty-five cents I can get my peanuts and you get yourself a soda, any flavor you want. Okay? What do you think?"

"But I do not desire to have a soda."

"You do not desire to have a soda?" Thunder spoke the words slowly, as if trying to figure out their meaning, as if confused by something about them, perhaps their tone. "Look, Mister, Joe, I'll buy you a soda." He walked to the soda machine, put his dollar bill in it, and that machine also rejected the bill. "Shoot." He walked over to Joe, sat in the chair next to him, so their elbows touched. "You got a neat, ironed dollar bill?"

"No, no, I do not." Joe stood, at first tentatively, so he almost paused as he rose, but then quickly and with a small air of defiance. He moved three seats away and sat down, looking at Thunder from the corners of his eyes.

Thunder stared at Joe. His stare lasted more than a minute, but neither man spoke. Then the ceiling spoke again. "Estimated arrival time of the nine-thirteen has been revised; the estimated arrival time is now ten twenty-two. Ten twenty-two." Both Joe and Thunder turned to look at the clock on the wall alongside the vending machines. It said 10:04. Thunder continued to stare at Joe; Joe looked back, seeing an emotion he could not recognize in Joe's eyes, but quickly averted his eyes, glancing at the darkness beyond the window, at the emptiness of the rest of the room, at the vacancy behind the counter.

"Why are you looking at me?" he said softly, almost pleadingly. But Thunder did not answer. 10:09. Thunder continued to stare. Joe stood and walked to the door that would take him to the tracks, but he decided not to go out. He didn't want to be outside alone with Thunder. If they had to be alone together he wanted to be inside. Suddenly he blurted out something he just realized: "You don't have any luggage. Are you traveling without any luggage?"

Thunder said, "Don't need none. You ain't got none either." He snickered for a few seconds, as if enjoying his observation. But then he became quiet and continued to stare. 10:16.

Joe went to the candy machine. He wanted to do something, but he decided he couldn't use the change he had in his pocket, because that might annoy Thunder. And for the same reason he couldn't take out an unwrinkled bill. He wasn't even certain he had a bill that wasn't wrinkled. He hoped he did not, because if Thunder found out about it, there might be a confrontation. Above everything else in life right now, Joe wanted to avoid a confrontation.

10:19. A long silence; Joe believed his forehead was perspiring, but he wasn't certain. He stood near the candy machine, but looked toward the blackness of the window. Still, he saw Thunder staring at him. The blackness beyond the window and the silence of the room and the insistence of Thunder's stare blended into a single entity. Joe now knew for certain that his forehead was heavy with perspiration. He refused to touch it, but he knew; he knew.

10:23. A rumbling from outside the window. The ceiling: "The nine-thirteen for Syracuse, Albany, Boston, and points in between and for transfer at Albany to Montreal and to New York City and

points south is now arriving; only passengers with tickets may board the train. Thank you for traveling Amtrak."

Joe took a tentative step toward the door, but he stopped when he saw Thunder rise. Thunder stood and extended himself as tall as he could, as if he were stretching without lifting his arms. He said, "My name ain't Thunder."

"What?"

"My name ain't Thunder."

"No?"

"No, it ain't."

"Oh."

"Ain't you curious what it is?"

Joe stammered a bit. Not a word, just an eh-eh-eh sound.

"It's Eddie."

"I—I see."

"Ain't you curious why I told ya it was Thunder?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you tell me your name was Thunder?"

"I ain't gonna tell ya." Eddie snickered. He seemed to Joe to be very pleased with himself.

Joe walked quickly through the doors to the trackside, and he knew Eddie was only a few steps behind him. A train was slowing, and a conductor stood on a train step and stepped to the platform a second or two before there was a complete stop. Joe felt a sense of panic. He wanted to know which car Eddie would get on, so he could get on another one, but he didn't want to turn and look. Eddie was about ten feet behind him, smiling blandly, his eyes vacant. Joe turned quickly to the conductor: "Can I get on a car near the front?"

"This is the only car we have open; once you're on you can relocate if you wish."

"Please."

The conductor looked mildly confused, as if he didn't know how to respond. "I'm sorry, sir, but this is the only entrance to the train at the moment; once you are on you can move to any car you wish. All seats are unreserved."

Joe handed his ticket to the conductor; his hand shook.

"Someone will take the ticket after you in-board, sir."

"In-board?"

"Yes, sir."

Joe got on the train. The car he entered had no passengers. He sat near its middle, at a window seat on the south side, the side near the station, because for the moment there was more light there. He knew the light from the platform would disappear as soon as the train pulled out, but for now it was something. Some grasp at comfort.

Eddie stood three seats in front of Joe. Then he walked slowly by him, never removing his eyes from Joe's face, and sat three rows in back of him, directly in back of him, so Joe couldn't see him even when he turned, because the backs of the seats were even with the top of Eddie's head. The train lurched an inch or two, then again, then it chugged and seemed to skip, and then it was rolling, slowly for a few seconds, but quickly the speed increased, and Joe realized he now had to ride the train for at least an hour and fifteen minutes before the next stop, Syracuse, and that he was alone in the car with a man who made him as frightened as he had ever been in his life. The man had done nothing, and Joe had done nothing to antagonize him, but Joe was certain in his gut that he was in great and immediate danger.

The interior walls of the car were silver; the seats alternated between red and blue, and each had a white cloth draped across the headrest. Two seats, a three-foot-wide aisle, and two more seats for the width; twenty or thirty rows for the length; neither Joe nor Eddie counted. Above each set of two seats, on the aisle side, were two small lights on the bottom of the luggage racks. About half of the lights were on. Coke and Pepsi cans, empty bags of potato chips, discarded newspapers, some crumpled Kleenex, a kid's red and green muff—the remains of passengers past—littered the empty seats and the empty aisle and the empty luggage racks. At the rear end of the car were two rest rooms, one with a sign that said Women, the other without a sign but with two screw holes indicating where a sign had once been. A conductor came in from the front door, walked down the aisle, glancing around as he approached the two passengers, and stopped in front of Joe. Joe looked up at him but didn't know what the conductor wanted.

"Your ticket, sir."

Joe took the ticket out of his jacket side pocket and handed it to the conductor.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," Joe said firmly, as if obeying a mother's elbow in his side.

The conductor ignored the response. Despite the Thank You and the Sir, he clearly had no interest in being polite and certainly not in being friendly. His tone was more disinterested than formal. He tore part of the ticket off, handed the rest back to Joe, and wrote something on a piece of cardboard and stuck it into a slot on the edge of the luggage rack. Then the conductor went on to Eddie and repeated the same routine, but Eddie said, "How long before we get to the next stop?"

"Estimated arrival time in Syracuse is now twelve-oh-four, sir." The conductor turned and walked toward the front of the car; as he did, he said into the air in front of him, "The dining car closed at nine."

Joe leaned over to see what the conductor had written, but he couldn't see it clearly, so he stood. "NYC" in thick black letters was on the top of a one-by-five white card. He wanted to turn to look at the card above Eddie but thought that if he did he would attract Eddie's attention, so he sat down.

"That's your destination," Eddie said. "They write your destination on the card, so if you're asleep when they get there, they know to wake you up." After a pause, he added, "Ain't you ever been on a train before?"

Joe did not turn around to answer. "I've been a passenger on a train many times in my life." It was a lie; this was his first time on a train, but he didn't want Eddie to know that; that might make Eddie think he was naive, or a novice, or in some other way vulnerable.

Joe sat in the window seat and looked out the window. He saw his own reflection and occasional glimpses of passing buildings. He tried to angle his glance to see Eddie, but he couldn't. Gradually he became aware of a series of soft, almost inaudible clicks and a growing sense of darkness. The darkness grew ever so slightly as the clicks continued. Then Eddie was alongside of him, walking forward, reaching up and clicking out all of the lights that were on. He clicked out the one shining on the empty seat next to Joe. Joe felt a small sense of panic, an emptying of his gut, a quick throb in his chest. He half stood and reached up quickly and turned on both of the lights for his pair of seats.

Eddie didn't turn around, but as he continued forward, clicking out more lights, he said, "You ain't reading."

"I like light," Joe said softly. He hoped he didn't sound timid.

"You need a night light," Eddie said with a false squeakiness in his voice.

"If I want the light on I can have the light on," Joe said, and for a moment he feared he would cry. God, he didn't want to cry.

"Ain't you heard there's an energy crisis?" Eddie was finished turning out all the lights, and he returned to his seat, three rows behind Joe. He repeated his question: "Ain't you heard there's an energy crisis? I said. I don't like being ignored like I ain't here. I am here and I asked you a civil question and I'm entitled to a civil answer. Ain't you heard there's an energy crisis? What do you think our boys are getting killed for in the Middle East?"

"Boys and girls," Joe said.

"What?"

"Boys and girls. There are girls fighting in this war, too."

"No they ain't."

"Yes they are. That information is readily available in the better newspapers and on the better quality news programs on television and radio. It was on National Public Radio."

"No they ain't."

"I read it in the paper and heard it on television. And on National Public Radio."

"There may be girls there but they ain't fighting. They don't let girls be in fighting outfits. They're what you call your support troops."

Joe paused for a few moments. He felt his face flush. "Yes, of course, you are correct. I was careless." He felt very embarrassed. He wanted to be alone, in a room all by himself, sitting or lying down, to allow the shame to go away. He felt his lips stretch and quiver a bit, as they always did when he felt shame.

Eddie thought of himself as a slight man. Certainly he was much smaller than Joe. He was five or six inches shorter, probably weighed fifty or sixty pounds less, had shoulders notably less wide, a neck obviously less thick, and a general appearance of being considerably weaker. He did not have the extra girth above the waist that Joe did, but he had a pot belly. The girth on Joe added to the sense of size and strength that goes with size; the small mound on Eddie only emphasized the slenderness of the rest of his body. Still, Eddie did not think of himself as physically inferior to anyone. He considered himself tough. The army rejected him when he applied

in the sixties because it didn't recognize that toughness, and he lost his chance to go to Vietnam. He was on his way now to Boston to join up there. The army or the navy or the air force or the marines or the coast guard; the service didn't matter. He would tell them he was ready to go to the Persian Gulf. Not to serve his country, not to prove anything to himself, not to come back a hero, not to do any of a thousand things an enlistment might do. But just to go; that's what guys like him were meant to do, and that's what, Jesus Christ almighty, he would do. The police department in Cleveland told him to go away, and when he wrote to the French Embassy in Washington for an application for the Foreign Legion, he never received a reply. The letter he sent to the French Embassy in Ottawa must have been misrouted, because two weeks after he sent it he received brochures on the Riviera and Paris and the French Alps. Christ, those were sissy places. He wasn't going to go to any of them. For now, he was going to Boston to join up. Then he would go overseas.

Joe annoyed him. Joe was too big, the type of man who makes other men back down in a bar. Damn it, Eddie wasn't going to back down, not from Joe, not from nobody.

"The dark bother you, Joe?" Soft lights illuminated the space between the luggage racks and the ceiling, and other softer lights lit a walking path down the aisle, but the spaces between the fronts and backs of seats, the spaces where people sat, were dark. Outlines of bodies could be seen, but nothing more, unless the reading lights were on. Eddie could see the light at Joe's seat, but not Joe; the backs of the seats were too high. "I said, does the dark bother you?"

"No, the dark is not a disturbance to me. I am a fully grown adult and I am long beyond the point in my life that would result in my being disturbed by the darkness."

"Shoot, man."

The conductor came in the front door and walked through the car. A walkie-talkie hanging from his belt and bouncing on his hip pocket squawked. No one was speaking on it. The noises were electronic, brief, and frequent, as if someone on the other end was playing with a button. The conductor left the car through the rear door.

"Know what happens next?" Eddie said.

"No." Joe's voice vibrated with timidity.

"In a few minutes, that conductor guy will come back. He just walks to the end of the train and then walks to the front. Dumb job. Dumb, man, dumb. You wouldn't catch me having a dumb job like that."

"His work is respectable, I am certain. A man, or a woman for that matter, should not be called derogatory names for performing respectable assignments."

"Shoot, man."

Then they were both quiet. After a few minutes, the conductor came through the rear door, walked through the car without speaking, and left through the front door.

"Dumb," Eddie said. "Dumb."

"I believe in the dignity of the working man," Joe said. "And the working woman."

"The working woman? You mean like streetwalkers? Whores? Where's the dignity in that? Shoot, man."

Joe did not answer. Eddie wanted Joe to say something; he wanted to have an argument with him. But he decided to wait. For what, he didn't know. But he would wait until it came.

Eddie watched the back of the seat Joe sat in. Joe looked at the reflection in the window, trying but unable to see Eddie.

The front door of the car slid open, and the conductor stepped inside, then paused and looked at the two men. After a few moments, he took two or three tentative steps further into the car, then walked very quickly past them and exited through the rear. "Looks like he don't want to spend no time with us," Eddie said. Joe didn't reply. He studied the reflection. Eddie stared at the back of the seat Joe sat in.

The back door to the car slid open. The conductor came in, stood at the door as it slid shut, and watched the two men. Eddie turned to watch him. Joe still looked at the reflection. The conductor turned quickly, took something from his pocket, did something with it to the door, placed it back in his pocket, and walked hurriedly—watching carefully to see what the two men were doing—to the front of the car. He exited quickly, but then there were some noises, like metal on metal, barely audible above the clanging and roaring of the train moving rapidly over the tracks.

"Shoot," Eddie said, and he stood quickly and ran down the aisle, bumping off the sides of several seats, until he was at the front door. He pushed the black panel marked Push, but the door wouldn't open. He banged it several times with his fist, and he kicked another panel at the bottom of the door. He turned and ran to the back of the train, muttering loud enough for Joe to hear, "The shoot-head locked us in here, the shoot-head."

He pushed and kicked at the rear door, but that one wouldn't open either. "Why the shoot would the shoot-head lock us in here?" He walked up to Joe's seat, took another step so he could see Joe's face. Joe turned from the window to face Eddie. Eddie said, "Why the shoot would he lock us in here? What did you do? Who the shoot are you?" He backed away, two steps, three, four steps, but then he stopped. "Who are you?" He was confident there was no fear in his voice, only demand; he wanted that to be there.

"My name is Joe. I've already informed you of that fact."

Eddie stuck his tongue out and licked his lower lip. He sat in the seat two rows in front of Joe and across the aisle, and he kept his body twisted to look at Joe.

Joe moved to the aisle seat and stared at Eddie.

Joe had no idea how much time had passed before he spoke. He wanted to be certain that his memory was correct, and that required that he take time to sort out the things that were flooding his mind. When he was certain of his memory, he said, "I know who you are. You're the man I read about in the newspaper in the station. You escaped from the home for adults who are in need of care. Aren't you?"

"What the shoot are you talking about?"

"I know who you are. You are a severely disturbed adult who requires institutionalization for the protection of society."

"You're crazy." Eddie wanted to sound threatening, and he was certain he did when he saw Joe's facial muscles tighten.

"No, sir, I am not," Joe said firmly, like a child determined to prove his point with the force of his voice. "You are not correct when you refer to me as crazy. I am not." After a few seconds, he added, "I am not."

"You're bonkers, looney, cuckoo, crazy, disturbed; you're a bean head."

"I am not, sir. I am not."

Then they were quiet and continued to stare at one another.

Occasionally the train passed a small village with a few street-lights, and that caused shadows to move rapidly across the interior of the car. Joe watched as Eddie's face briefly disappeared and suddenly reappeared, dim and incomplete, but still visible. At one point Eddie smiled; his teeth were uneven, one upper tooth between the front and the corner of the mouth was missing; the teeth were yel-

lowish. Joe refused to smile; he did not want to reveal his baby teeth. He thought that maybe he should go to the men's room and brush his teeth. He wasn't certain there was a sink and running water there, but he decided not to go for a different reason: he didn't realize he would be able to lock the rest room door, and he thought Eddie might follow him in and watch, that Eddie might see that he still had his baby teeth, and he didn't want Eddie to see that. Not Eddie.

The front door to the car opened slowly. The conductor who had been in the car earlier came in, but this time he had another man with him. The second man wore bib overalls that were greyish, like old-time train engineers in cowboy movies. They talked briefly and almost silently to each other. Standing at the open door they surveyed the car. The conductor waved with his fingers—his hand held inches in front of his chest—to Eddie. "Sir, may I speak to you, please."

Eddie pointed to his own chest. "Me? You wanna speak to me?"

"Yes, sir, if you don't mind."

"What about?"

"Would you smile for me, sir?"

"Smile? What for?"

"Please humor me, sir."

Eddie smiled quickly and briefly, as if mocking happiness.

The conductor then spoke to Joe. "Sir, would you smile for me, please."

"I would rather not, if you don't mind."

"Please, sir."

"Am I required to do so as a condition of being a passenger on this mode of transportation?"

"Shoot," Eddie muttered.

The conductor said something softly to the man in the overalls. Then he turned to Joe. "Yes, sir. That is a condition of being a passenger on Amtrak."

"Shoot," Eddie said.

"Very well; if you insist," Joe said. He smiled broadly and held his smile for five or six seconds. Then he made it disappear.

"Thank you, sir."

The conductor turned to Eddie. "Sir, please come with me. It is very important."

"Is my smile better than his?" He had glanced at Joe's smile and had seen the smallness of his teeth. He didn't know why they were

small. "My teeth ain't so good, but that ain't no reason for you to make me come up there."

The man in the overalls said something very softly to the conductor. The conductor said loudly enough for Joe and Eddie to hear, "Hell, no. You do that."

The man in the overalls didn't say anything, and for a few moments he just stood next to the conductor. He looked very nervous, but then he walked forward, at first slowly but then at a normal speed. He stopped a foot or two in front of Eddie and leaned over and whispered, "We believe this other man is dangerous and that for your own safety you should leave this car." He backed down the aisle quickly, bumping into the back of one seat, but managing to reach the conductor in a few seconds.

Eddie waited until the man in the overalls was next to the conductor. Then he stood and turned to Joe: "Bye-bye, looney bird." He walked to the front of the car, and with the two other men he left. The conductor quickly took a device out of his pocket and locked the door behind them. The three men stood in the crowded area between two cars. The shaking of the train was far greater there than it had been in the middle of the car.

"What's going on?" Eddie said, not trying to hide his annoyance.

"We think that man in there," the conductor said, "is an escapee from a mental institution. We got a radioed report from the Rochester police. Syracuse police will get on board at our next stop and take him in, but he might be dangerous. I'm sorry I locked you in there with him. When I got the report I had to do something to protect the other passengers on the train, so I locked both doors quickly. Then I realized that you could be in danger, so Mel came with me to get you out."

"Lucky you have rotten teeth," Mel said.

"What the shoot does that mean?"

"We were told the guy they want is big," Mel said, "but to make positive identification we were told to look for perfect baby teeth. Grown man but he still has his baby teeth. Soon as I saw your yellow teeth, ragged, one missing, I knew you were not the one they want."

"Ain't nothing wrong with my teeth."

"I didn't say there was."

"You sure as shoot did. You pretty much said the same thing as I'm ugly."

"Sir," the conductor said, sensing Eddie's growing anger, "let's get a seat in this car. Me and Mel will stand guard here."

"I ain't ugly and ain't nothin' wrong with my teeth."

"Oh, Christ," Mel said. "We have enough trouble without you starting an argument."

Suddenly Eddie had produced a knife from somewhere; not a knife, a bayonet, and he slashed it across the front of Mel's neck. As Mel's jaw vibrated and blood flowed out in little spurts, Eddie turned and shoved the knife into the conductor's chest. The whole sequence took less than four seconds. Eddie was proud of his quickness. If the army recruiters knew of his quickness with a bayonet, they would welcome him with enthusiasm, and that jerk of a sergeant who said he couldn't join to go to Vietnam because of the way he used a knife on that kid in high school, he would be embarrassed passing up such talent.

Both the conductor and Mel were down on the floor. Mel's head was on top of the back of the conductor's neck; the conductor's left hand was open at his own chest. Eddie thought of pushing them out the door, but then he thought that the train might come to a halt if a door opened while it was in motion. He yanked the bayonet from out of the conductor's chest. It wasn't an easy task because of the angle. He had to reach under both men and had little room to maneuver. He wiped the blade on the conductor's jacket. Then he took some Kleenex from his pocket and wrapped it around the blade. Holding the tissue, he wiped the handle back and forth on Mel's overalls. The knife was now clean, and still holding it in the tissue, he used the conductor's key to let himself back into the car. The door slid shut behind him. He walked toward Joe, who was looking at the reflection in the window until he heard the door shut. Joe looked up at Eddie, who walked up to him, right up to him, so his belt was just inches from his face.

"Here, take this." He held the bayonet out for Joe to take by the handle.

At first, Joe did not move. He said, "Why?"

"Because I can see you're afraid of me. And I thought if you had a weapon, you wouldn't be afraid anymore."

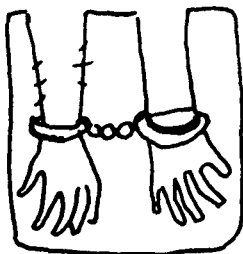
Joe reached hesitantly for the weapon; his hand paused with his fingers circled around but not touching the handle for a second. Then he grasped it.

"See ya," Eddie said. He walked to the front of the car, watching as Joe watched him. "See ya," he called. He stepped around the two dead men and went into the next car. He took a seat across the aisle from a pretty, college-age girl who seemed to be asleep, although

she wore headphones from a Walkman, and Eddie could clearly hear the beat of an acid-rock song. He liked the name Thunder, he decided, and he would use it again. He was becoming good at deception; the army would like that, if he could figure out a way to prove it to them. They wouldn't let him join in San Francisco, or in Kansas City, or in Indianapolis. And not in Rochester. Maybe in Boston they had more sense. He dozed off, watching the breast of the young girl rise and fall.

In the other car, Joe turned to look out the window, to watch his own reflection. He didn't feel happy thinking about Eddie. When he'd looked to the front of the car a few minutes earlier, Eddie was gone and the door was closed. Joe wondered why the two men had come in to take Eddie out with them. But he didn't wonder too much or too hard. So many things had happened to him so many times in his life that he could not understand, that he had developed the useful habit and ability of denying himself the right to wonder.

When the train stopped in Syracuse, policemen came into the car from the rear door and the front door at the same time. There were four of them, and they all held pistols. "Put down that knife," one of them said sternly. Joe had long ago, at the institution, learned to obey sternness immediately, so he did what he was told. He placed the bayonet on the floor alongside his seat. They placed his hands behind his back and put handcuffs on them and led him out the rear door. He did not know anything about the two bodies between his car and the one in front of it. He would not learn about them until he was back in the institution in Rochester the next morning. By then, nobody believed him about a man named Eddie or Thunder. Just like before he left; they so seldom believed him.



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Tim Lamont lives in Tustin, California, where he works as a shoe salesman for Nordstrom's. His first published fiction depicts a very sinister form of advertising . . .

BAD BOY

by **TIM LAMONT**

Allen Owens stood hunched at the third-floor window of the furniture warehouse, peering at the billboard through his Sky Rover telescope.

He saw the billboard five days a week on his way to work and it never seemed strange from the vantage point of his car, but from the window just east of the freeway and south of the billboard, something bugged him.

The billboard was angled so motorists heading north on the 55 freeway would have optimum view. The twelve-by-twenty-four-foot ad was for Bad Boy scotch, with its increasingly familiar squared-off bottle lying empty on its side. A fully restored '69 red Mustang raced along the top side of the brown glass bottle, kicking up dust, smoke, and odd debris. Across the top in bold letters it read, "HURRY HOME. BAD BOY'S WAITING."

He brought the telescope into tighter focus and scanned the ad a section at a time. Everything looked very normal and he was starting to feel foolish for bringing the telescope to work with him. Just an ad. Maybe it had some subliminal messages airbrushed in, and his subconscious was getting an eyeful.

He shrugged and swung the telescope away—but his peripheral vision caught something that his direct attention had missed. He turned the scope back on the billboard. It was something in the cloud of debris at the back of the car. It looked like a bowl of some kind. He looked under the car where the dust was the thickest.

© 1992 by Tim Lamont.

There was something furry. A poodle! The bastards had run over a goddamn poodle . . .

After a few wrong turns, Owens found the access road which zig-zagged through the industrial buildings to the billboard. Rush-hour traffic crept by in the gathering dusk, just a few feet away on the other side of the freeway fence.

He got out of his trusty grey Toyota truck and studied the situation. The billboard was supported by five evenly spaced metal pilings. Everything but the ad itself was painted taupe brown. There was brown over-spray on the asphalt at the base of each pile. A thick cable ran from a nearby power line to the base of the end pile and up to an electric meter and timing box, then continued up to a set of spotlights. The middle pile provided a rung ladder which began about nine feet up. "Alright Advertising" was printed on a small, weathered plaque suspended from the billboard, and a peeling I.D. number was stuck on the lower left-hand corner of the poster.

Owens got back in his truck, pulled around behind the sign, and parked under the ladder. From the bed of his truck, it was an easy reach. He pulled himself up hand over hand until his feet reached the bottom rung. In this position it would be unlikely for anyone to see him but he feared the approach of a police car just the same. He climbed the few additional rungs and hoisted himself onto the catwalk which ran the length of the billboard.

It seemed to be much higher than when he was safe on the ground looking up. There were no hand-holds and it was breezier than he'd expected. Colder too.

He slowly side-stepped his way along, leaning further forward than was necessary. The wind wasn't so bad now. He ignored the freeway to his back and only briefly considered the thousand or so people who might glance up and see him.

The spotlights clicked on. He took a startled step back, nearly losing it, and recovered on his knees with his hands tightly clutching the wooden planks of the catwalk.

Someone in a car behind him shouted, "Jerk!"

Owens stood up, keeping his hands pressed flat against the poster. At this close range, much of the mystery was gone. He could see the poster had been put up in sections and was of two enlarged photographs carefully edited to place the Mustang on the bottle. He positioned himself under the rear of the car and could see very plainly the run-over dog. Some of the stuff that looked like dust

from street level was dry dog food. They had set a bowl of food out to distract the dog.

After driving straight home, Owens looked up Alright Advertising in his business-to-business phone directory. He dialed the number and a minute later got the beep of an answer phone.

"Yes, this is Allen Owens and I'm calling to complain about your advertising. In particular, your billboard number 8025. It's quite offensive. I think there might be any number of special interest groups which might also find it so. I think you know what I mean. Please call me first thing in the morning and we can talk about a settlement. This would be in exchange for me keeping my, oh—how should I say—insights to myself." He left his number and hung up.

Owens went to bed, confident of the outcome. He would teach those psychotics to lay off helpless animals.

Shortly before eight o'clock in the morning, a Mr. Peterson called. "Allen Owens, please."

"Speaking."

"Mr. Owens, what's this all about?"

"I think you know very well what it's all about."

"Let's say I do. What do you want?"

"I have certain demands such as—"

"Have you shared your 'insights' with anyone. I mean anyone at all."

"No one. I—"

"You mentioned billboard 8025. Do any of our other ads offend you?"

"Oh, yes. I can see through all of them. You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't—"

"I want to come out to your home and personally discuss this with you."

"I was just going to tell you that was my first demand."

"Please, just give me the address."

Owens did as he was told, then added, "I don't get home from work till around five-thirty."

"Fine. See you then." Click.

Owens held the dead phone out at arm's-length and looked into the mouthpiece. "You're pushy for a dog-killing bastard."

Owens sat at a table in the employee lunchroom and picked at his potato salad. The stuff tasted awful. He'd be sure to tell the cook

the next time he saw him. Get a refund, probably. He thumbed through a coverless magazine someone had left on the table. It fell open to the center where a two-page ad for Bad Boy caught his eye. Across the top in block letters it read, "WHEN THE BAD BOY'S GONE, IT'S TIME FOR SLEEP." The picture, which took up most of the two pages, was of a woman sprawled out in bed. She was lying on her stomach, naked. Long blond hair spilled down, covering her strategic places. Her head was turned at an impossible angle that only a limber drunk could manage. Next to her bed on the nightstand was the Bad Boy trade mark: an empty bottle lying on its side. The underlining caption said, "LADY GODIVA."

Owens studied the picture for hidden images. It was obviously sexual but he was searching for anything else—perhaps something as revolting as the billboard's smashed poodle—that might grab the unsuspecting subconscious.

Nothing.

Still, there was something about it that made him nervous. Something that made him want to reach for a drink. Well, that was okay. He had enough to make Alright squirm. Let them offer all kinds of money. Once they spilled their guts, he would pull his hidden tape recorder out and shake it in their faces. That would teach them.

Owens left work early and made it home a few minutes after five. He sat in his cracked vinyl TV chair and thought about the Lady Godiva ad again. It didn't make sense to go to such risky extremes in a billboard and then use straightforward advertising in the magazine ad. He switched on the lamp and studied the ad again.

He tried holding it upside down and sideways. It was still just a bedroom scene with a naked woman passed out. He looked at the nightstand, at the two empty shot glasses next to the bottle. Clever. Bad Boy scotch was gone and so was the "bad boy" who got the lady drunk. Owens found the ad's appeal to the more base of human desires rude, but certainly not criminal. He read the copy again: "WHEN THE BAD BOY'S GONE, IT'S TIME FOR SLEEP. LADY GODIVA."

Why Lady Godiva?

The letters were even highlighted by indirect lighting to give the illusion of three dimensions. Soft, indistinct shadows of the letters were visible across the satin sheets.

LADY GODIVA.

NO. It really looked more like, LADY GODAVA. When they touched up the shadows, they misspelled GODIVA.

He found more mistakes. The horizontal line of the "G" was missing, lost in a fold of the sheet. The "O" was misshapen and there seemed to be an extra letter at the end. Maybe an "H" or a distorted "R".

CADAVAH? CADAVAR . . . ?

Owens looked again at the woman's expressionless face, her head turned a little too far towards the ceiling.

CADAVER—

LADY CADAVER!

A car pulled up out front. Owens bolted from the chair and grabbed his tape recorder off the TV. He rummaged around in the living room closet and found the box with all his tapes. Since he had never owned a VCR, he was stuck with taping only the sound of his favorite TV shows. There was no time to hunt for a blank tape so he grabbed a tape labeled "Phil Donahue" and shoved the box back up on the closet shelf.

He heard a car door slam.

Pulling aside a small corner of the living room drapes, he saw a tall, balding man in a charcoal-grey suit walking across the lawn towards his door. He quickly hid the tape recorder behind a row of books on the shelf next to his TV chair.

The doorbell rang.

Almost forgetting, he reached behind the books again and punched a button.

The tape ejected.

The doorbell rang again.

He pushed the tape back in and punched a button further to the left. "Hang on. I'm coming!"

Owens opened the door. "Mr. Peterson?"

"Yes. Hello, Mr. Owens."

"Please come in."

Peterson followed him into the living room and took the offered chair near the bookcase. Phil Donahue suddenly roared out from behind the books about the injustice of society's treatment of homosexuals. Peterson pitched forward. "What the hell—"

Owens lunged forward and cut Donahue off in mid-sentence, knocking several books over in the process. "Don't you just love that show? I was all set to play it again, when you drove up."

"Do you always play it from behind a stack of books?"

"What? Oh, yes! Much better sound that way—Look, I owe you an apology for dragging you out here like this. I must have lost my head. I won't keep you any longer."

Peterson settled back in the chair. "It's no trouble. I'm quite concerned about offending you with my ads. Exactly what about them upset you?"

"Oh nothing, really. I can be such a do-gooder. I mean so what if the car on the billboard appears to be exceeding the speed limit. There's no law about how fast you can drive on a whiskey bottle."

"What else?"

"Well, your magazine ad seems to condone the use of alcohol as a sleeping aid. But what's so wrong with that? I mean we'd all die if we didn't sleep. Not die. I mean we'd get mighty tired. Wouldn't we?"

"Yes. I suppose we would. Tell me—who else have you discussed this with?"

"Like I said on the phone, nobody. I wish only to let this whole matter drop."

Peterson stood up. "I'll give serious thought to your criticisms of our ads. We've had a few other complaints in the past. You might be pleased to know we're considering a whole new image for Bad Boy."

"I'm sure that's your business." Owens led him towards the door. "Thanks again for coming and I'm sorry for the trouble."

After Peterson had left, Owens stood at the open door, trembling. Peterson's parting words lingered in the air like a foul smell.

"It's a funny thing. Of the half-dozen or so complainers, only one decided to pursue matters. And would you believe that beautiful young woman later posed for our Lady Godiva ad . . . ?"



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DOUG ALLYN

I took the weapon, instantly liking the heft, the balance of it. The hammer was on half cock for safety, so I eased the piece to my shoulder, keeping the muzzle downrange. Perfect. The Springfield's front sight seemed to follow my glance as naturally as pointing a fingertip. Almost without thinking, I cocked the hammer, centered the sights on a target, and squeezed off. The gun bucked, the target disappeared in a puff of red dust, and it was only then that I realized it was a hundred yards away, not fifty.

"This," I said, examining the weapon more closely, "is one very friendly rifle . . ."

THE TEN-POUND PARROTT

by DOUG ALLYN

Personally, I never liked uniforms much. They chafe at the collar and the soul, and I don't think I've ever had big-time fun while I was wearing one. Running a lakefront tavern in a small northern Michigan town, I see a lot of uniforms nowadays: Coast Guard, Navy, local cops, soldiers home on leave. I've got nothing against the people who wear them, but saloons and uniforms can be a chancy mix. Some loudmouth makes a crack, somebody takes offense, and the next thing I know my customers are bouncing off the walls and smashing furniture on each other. So when six guys decked out in authentic Union Army, Civil War outfits complete with forage caps, boots, and brass buttons marched in on a busy Saturday night, my heart rate bumped up a notch. Especially since one of them was packing an eighteen-inch spike bayonet in his belt scabbard.

As I made my way toward the Yanks through my weekend dinner crowd of tourists, skin divers, and fishermen, I recognized the guy

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with the bayonet. Harry Klecko, a local roughneck, jerk of all trades. His buddies looked like a hard lot, too—like seasoned combat vets, which was odd considering they were dressed like extras from *Gone With the Wind II*. A couple of them looked vaguely familiar, but I didn't know anyone by name. Too bad. I arrived as they were seating themselves at one of the large family tables.

"Welcome to the Crow's Nest, gentlemen. Will you be dining with us this evening?"

"Wining and dining both," a heavysset, fortyish redhead wearing broad sergeant's chevrons said, "or at least beering and eating. Why don't we start with two pitchers of Coors, couple of bowls of pretzels, and some menus?"

"Be happy to, except for one small problem," I said. "Huron Harbor has an ordinance against weapons in establishments where liquor is served. You'll have to stow the bayonet in your car, Harry."

"Don't gimme no static, Mitchell, I've had a long day," Klecko grumbled, mopping his face with a table napkin. He looked tired and surly. They all did.

"Tell you what," I said, "why don't I just keep it in my office until you're ready to leave, okay?"

"And supposin' it's not okay?" Klecko said, standing up slowly, tossing the napkin aside. "You plan on throwin' us all out all by your lonesome?"

"Us?" I said. "The only problem I see is the bayonet, Harry. And it's leaving. Whether you gentlemen decide to leave with it is up to you. Now what's it gonna be?"

The redheaded sergeant coolly scanned the room—looking for my backup, I suppose—then shrugged. "Give him the pig sticker, Klecko. We don't need any hassle."

"What the hell, Hobart, you gonna let Mitchell just . . ." Harry's complaint trickled off into silence. Hobart hadn't said a word, just stared at him. He held out his beefy paw, Harry gave him the bayonet, and the sergeant passed it to me.

"Don't lose it, it's an honest-to-God antique," he said.

"I'll guard it with my life," I said. "I'll send the waitress along with your order. Enjoy yourselves."

I was curious about the uniforms, but decided to let sleeping dogs lie. I kept a weather eye on them from my office, but they were no trouble. They killed a few beers, ordered prime-rib dinners all around, and scarfed them down like wolves. Or guys who've been

playing soldier all day in the July sun. Three of the six drifted off within an hour or so, Klecko among them. The sergeant stayed on with a couple of the others, watching the Tigers/Red Sox game on the TV over the bar. He glanced back at my office from time to time. Maybe keeping track of the antique bayonet. Or something.

Around seven-thirty, another guy in a Civil War outfit came in, a captain in a frock coat, gold epaulets, striped pants, the works. He was dark, slender as a riding crop, looked mid-twentyish. His uniform was an impeccable fit, probably custom-tailored. He spoke to the men at the table, then he and the redheaded sergeant made their way back to my office and rapped on the open door.

"Hi, Mitch," the young captain said, offering his hand, "remember me? I think I was about nine the last time we met."

"My God," I said slowly, "you're Andrea Deveraux's not-so-little brother, right? Kirk, isn't it?"

"Very astute." He grinned. "I gather you've already met Jack Hobart?"

"Sort of," I said, shaking the big sergeant's hand warily. "Sit, gents, be comfortable, and for openers, Kirk, what's with the uniforms?"

"Some companies have bowling teams. Mine's going to sponsor a Civil War skirmish squad," Kirk said, easing down in one of the spindle-backed mate's chairs facing my desk. "The 17th Michigan Artillery. The same outfit my great-great-grandfather assembled back in 1861."

"I see. Which company? Deveraux Shipping, the transmission plant?"

"Not one of the family firms," Kirk said, cutting me off, faintly annoyed. "It's my own company, Deveraux Optimetrics. We've been based in California, but I'm in the middle of shifting my R&D section back home to Huron Harbor."

"Glad to hear it," I said, "the area can use the work."

"I'm afraid we won't be employing many locals," Kirk shrugged. "We're strictly high tech—master's degrees or better in computer software engineering, systems analysis, that sort of thing. Which is why I'm here. One drawback to having a company staffed with computer nerds is that not many of them shoot. Jack here's put together a first-rate team from his security section, but we need one more expert shot. I'd like you to try out for the squad, Mitch."

"Me?" I said. "I don't understand."

"It's simple. My company manufactures laser optic guidance systems for the Defense Department. The skirmish team can be a great public-relations gimmick for us, but only if we shoot well. I intend to win a national championship with this team, Mitch, and to do that I need the best shots I can find. According to your Navy SEAL training records, you qualified as an expert with the M-16E1, the M-60, the Swedish K, and the AK-47, and you had sniper and munitions training as well. You're exactly the kind of guy we need. An expert."

"I see," I said slowly, bridging my fingers, eyeing Kirk across them. "Mind telling me how you got a look at my military records?"

"We do a lot of work for the Defense Department," Hobart put in. "Every man on the squad is ex-military."

"The key syllable being *ex*-military, in my case," I said. "I'm flattered you went to the trouble, guys, but I've got a business to run. I don't have time to—"

"I wouldn't expect you to do it for free," Kirk interrupted. "My great-great-grandfather paid an enlistment bonus of three hundred dollars a man—"

"Look, I'm just not—"

"—which, adjusted for inflation, comes to roughly six thousand, eight hundred and forty-three dollars and twenty-one cents. Let's say seven thousand even. Plus twelve hundred a month for as long as you're with the team."

I blinked. "Are you serious? Seven thousand bucks? To do what, exactly?"

"To shoot," Kirk said simply. "Once or twice a month, no more. We'll supply your uniform, your weapons, the works. *If* you're good enough to make the team, that is. Tell you what, Mitch, why don't you stop by the house tomorrow, check out our operation? If you do well, maybe I'll show you our ten-pound Parrott."

"Your what?"

"What's the matter, Mitch?" Kirk grinned, rising. "An old campaigner like you never heard of the big iron bird?"

"I worked for a bird colonel once," I said.

"Not even close," Kirk said, checking his watch. "I have to run, Mitch. Mr. Hobart can answer any questions you may have. See you tomorrow, elevenish." He flipped me a mock salute and was out the door without a backward glance.

Hobart shook his head. "He does that all the time."

"Does what?"

"Automatically assumes people will jump up and whistle Dixie for the right price. He doesn't mean anything by it."

"He's probably right more often than not," I said. "What was all that about a big parrot?"

"Sorry," Hobart said, shaking his head, "the boss loves surprises, he'll have to explain that one. As far as the team goes—like the man said, we shoot. We'll be competing against other teams at meets called skirmishes. Weapons and dress have to be authentic, but beyond that it's just for fun. Or it was until Kirk got serious about it. Which is another thing he does. Kirk may seem a little flaky, but once he gets hold of an idea he's the most tenacious sonofabitch I've ever known, with the possible exception of his father. I take it you know the family?"

"Everybody in Huron Harbor knows the family. Hell, half the town works for them one way or another. I was a gardener, boat-boy, general roustabout for them when I was a kid."

"Kirk mentioned you used to date Andrea."

"In high school," I said. "Nothing heavy."

"She dated boat-boys in high school?"

"Andrea's taste in friends has always been fairly wide-ranging," I said. "And at the time I was a pretty good quarterback. A thousand years ago."

"Couldn't have been that long, not the way she looks. She's in town, you know."

"No kidding," I said, keeping my tone neutral. "How is she?"

"She looks like a million bucks, which is probably what her allowance is. Per month." He eased stiffly to his feet. "Maybe you'll see her tomorrow if you stop by. I hope you do."

"Do you? And why would that be?"

"Because I've only got seven slots on the team," Hobart said bluntly. "Which means if you sign up, I can dump Harry Bigmouth Klecko."

"You know something, Sergeant Hobart?" I said. "This deal is sounding better and better."

I drove out to the Deveraux estate the next morning. I hadn't been there in years, but I had no trouble finding it. I started working here mowing lawns when I was twelve. I could find my way out here in my sleep. And I often have. A few things had changed. A new spear-tipped, wrought-iron security fence snaked around the grounds, uncoiling into the distance, and I had to identify myself to

a tinny speakerphone in the gatepost like ordering a takeout from a McDonald's drive-thru. When I was a kid, we never locked gates. Now we talk to them. America, America.

The estate is essentially a Yankee clone of an Antoinette-era French chateau in brick and granite: twenty-eight rooms, six-car garage, servants' quarters, stables, greenhouse, an enclosed pool, a tennis court dreaming on the crest of a seven-hundred-acre bluff facing Huron Bay, a view that'll stop your heart if the house hasn't done that already.

I parked my Jeep Cherokee wagon between a Jag XJ12 and a couple of Benzes, sauntered up the marble steps to the front door, and tapped the buzzer. Chimes sounded from within like a whisper of raindrops on Waterford crystal. And Andrea Deveraux opened the door. Not a maid. Andrea.

"Hi, Mitch. How are you?"

"Good—I'm good," I mumbled, maintaining some semblance of aplomb, I hoped. She looked fine—a few years older, of course, but even more magnetic than I remembered, her dark hair cropped close, framing her angular, aquiline face, not conventionally pretty but all the more attractive for that. She was wearing whites—shorts, sleeveless blouse, tennis shoes—no stockings, no jewelry. We stood there in silence a moment, frankly sizing each other up, then smiled simultaneously.

"You really do look good," she said frankly. "I should spend more time here. Come on in, we're having coffee on the veranda. Are you still running the Crow's Nest?"

"Among other things," I said, following her through the two-story, tapestry-draped entrance hall out to the sprawling flagstone deck that faced the rear of the estate. Manicured lawns meandered on for a thousand yards or so to the treeline of the Black River hills, rolling away in forested waves to the horizon. A strikingly lovely Vietnamese woman and two Eurasian girls were seated at a redwood table cluttered with silver and the remains of a recent brunch beneath a huge yellow-fringed umbrella. Everyone seemed to be wearing white this morning but me.

"Have you met my brother Brad's family, Mitch? Mei, this is Brian Mitchell, an old friend. Mitch, Meiling Deveraux and her daughters, Lysette and Lin Lin."

Meiling scanned me with vaguely disinterested almond eyes. If I was furniture, she wasn't buying. Both girls said polite hellos. Lysette, a perky, muscular teenager with straight black hair cut tom-

boy short, had no accent, but her younger sister's greeting was barely comprehensible, mumbled toward her plate, her eyes downcast.

"Sit," Andrea ordered, sliding into her own chair. "Tell me something trashy about people I like."

"Gee, there are so many funky situations it'll take at least an hour to bring you up to speed—say over lunch sometime this week? Or perhaps dinner?"

"I'll call you," Andrea said, rising again. "I'm afraid we have to run. Brad, you remember Mitch."

I turned—and shook hands with Andrea's eldest brother, or his ghost. He looked nearer to his father's generation than ours. An inch or two taller than Kirk, he was easily thirty pounds lighter, his dark hair salted with premature silver, his face ravaged, seamed with pain lines. He'd been shot down over Hanoi back in '73 and had never truly made it all the way home. He gave me an absent nod.

"And this lout," Andrea continued, "is a friend of mine from Florida, Tony Craddock." Craddock's grip was a contest, or would have been if I'd let it. I don't know whether he intuitively recognized me as one of Andrea's exes or was just a cruncher by nature. He was tall and beefy, linebacker-sized with a shaggy blond mane, worn shoulder length. His muscles had been sculpted to three-dimensional perfection by a lot of iron pumping. He gave me a photogenically friendly grin, flashing a terrific set of tooth caps. "Always glad to meet Andy's old friends, sir." Not a subtle guy.

"We've a court reserved for noon at Harbor View Club," Brad said, casually moving between us, his hand on my shoulder. "Care to join us, Mitch?"

"Thank you, no," I said. "Actually, I stopped by to see Kirk. Is he around?"

"Probably in the greenhouse." Brad shrugged. "He almost lives there these days. Playing soldier. You thinking of enlisting in his little army?"

"Any reason why I shouldn't?" I hedged, surprised by the contempt in his tone.

"None at all," he said acidly. "It pays better than the real thing ever did. And you already know your way to the greenhouse. Well, gang, shall we be off? Lin honey, you don't have to do that. Leave it. The maid will take care of it."

His younger daughter had begun hurriedly clearing up the dishes. If she heard Brad, she gave no sign, continuing to gather the silver until her mother spoke sharply to her in Vietnamese.

"She hasn't been with us long," Brad explained. "Still has a bit of adjusting to do. Good to see you, Mitchell."

"You, too," I nodded as he herded the group out. Andrea didn't look back, but Craddock did for a moment, as if memorizing my features. Lin Lin warily trailed the party like a rear guard, keeping her escape routes open.

I strolled across a half acre of lawn toward the greenhouse, enjoying the sun and the aroma of freshly mown grass. A horn beeped back at the house, probably Brad and crew saying goodbye. And a moment later, a shot rang out.

I froze, barely resisting a "hit the dirt" reflex. The report had come from the greenhouse. I could tell from the echo that it hadn't been aimed toward me. Still, old habits die hard, especially when gunfire's involved. The door was open, so I entered the building cautiously, without knocking.

I paused inside the door, letting my eyes adjust, but scarcely believing them when they had. The building had been gutted, completely transformed into a combination workshop and war museum. A number of tables still remained, but instead of potted plants they held dioramas, miniature battlefield scenes from a dozen different eras, sandscapes labeled El Alemein and Khafji, greener depictions of Gettysburg, Second Bull Run, the Somme, the Bulge, Little Big Horn, the landscapes and vegetation wonderfully detailed. But oddly empty of the artifacts of war. No miniature soldiers or cavalry or tanks, just the villages or the vistas of the killing fields themselves. What human figures there were—Kuwaiti villagers in Khafji, the Cheyenne and Sioux camps on the Little Big Horn—seemed peacefully engaged in everyday pursuits.

The greenhouse wall facing the hills had been modified with sliding doors, which were open. Kirk Deveraux and Jack Hobart were silhouetted in the sunlight just outside, both men dressed casually in jeans and sports shirts, wreathed by powder smoke, checking the mechanism of a musket Hobart had just fired. There were weapons everywhere, racks of rifles on the floor and the walls, everything from flintlocks to AK-47s. Several muskets were clamped in an elaborate vise on a long workbench, their muzzles aiming out the door, downrange.

I made my way through the displays, pausing beside the last scene, one that was agonizingly familiar. It was labeled An Loc, but it could have been any of a dozen Vietnamese towns I'd seen. The hooches, the galvanized-roof buildings, street vendors, pedicabs, even the leaves on the trees had been perfectly recreated. It looked so real I felt a stab of vertigo—a gut feeling that if I wasn't careful I could lose my footing and plunge a thousand feet and twenty years to the jungle below.

"Well, does it pass inspection?" Kirk said, startling me.

"It's—almost real," I said. "I've never seen anything like it."

He grinned. "Like the man said, you ain't seen nothin' yet." He flicked a switch below the table and An Loc suddenly bustled to life, people walking the streets, cars and motorbikes humming—and, from the northeast, a column of NVA T-54 tanks rumbling toward the town. Without thinking, I reached out to touch one, and it disappeared. "Laser holograms," Kirk explained, indicating a box with multifaceted lenses mounted in the ceiling over the table. "The tank and troop movements are either computer-generated images or models photographed a frame at a time."

"Glad to hear it," I said. "For a moment, I thought you'd invented a time machine."

"Nothing so grand," Kirk said. "Like the skirmish team, the dioramas are strictly a public-relations ploy. When we have the software perfected, we'll donate units to museums all over the country. At suitably newsworthy intervals."

"Right," I said, "all completely deductible, strictly business. But just between you and me, Kirk, isn't all this stuff a helluva lot of fun to play with?"

He gave me a sidelong mischievous grin, and a momentary glimpse of the nine-year-old boy I'd known all those years ago. "Speaking strictly off the record," he admitted, "I have so much fun out here it ought to be illegal. The fact that it's gonna be great PR and tax free as well just ices the Twinkie."

"Speaking of illegal," I said, racking the bolt of an M-60 machine gun, "this thing looks functional."

"It is. Standard military issue. I have a BATF firearms-and-munitions license for all of this."

"Munitions?"

"Absolutely," he said, indicating several cases stored beneath the diorama—C-4 and Pentolite and a dozen different metal cans of black powder.

"What on earth are you doing with all this stuff? You've got enough equipment for a small war."

"The C-4 and Pentolite are for explosive shells—it's safer to handle than gunpowder. We experimented with various types of black powder until we perfected a load that gives us maximal accuracy from the '63 Springfield. Come on, I'll show you."

I followed him past the racks of rifles to where Hobart was reloading the musket he'd just fired. "You see those red dots on that log against the treeline?" Kirk said. "They're three-inch ceramic tiles, exactly a hundred yards off. Think you can hit one?"

"With an M-16 maybe," I said. "But with a black powder musket? You must be kidding."

"Not at all," Kirk said, taking the weapon from Hobart. "What we have here is an exemplary blend of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century military technology, an 1863 Springfield musket, exactly replicated with modern steel, flawless rifling, its sights laser-aligned. I can guarantee that each of these guns will fire precisely to the point of aim at a hundred yards, Mitch. Every time. In expert hands, that is. Give it a try. Start with a fifty-yard target if you like."

I took the weapon, instantly liking the heft, the balance of it. The hammer was on half cock for safety, so I eased the piece to my shoulder, keeping the muzzle downrange. Perfect. The Springfield's front sight seemed to follow my glance as naturally as pointing a fingertip. Almost without thinking, I cocked the hammer, centered the sights on a target, and squeezed off. The gun bucked, the target disappeared in a puff of red dust, and it was only then that I realized it was a hundred yards away, not fifty.

"This," I said, examining the weapon more closely, "is one very friendly rifle."

"Can you do that again?" Kirk asked, all trace of amusement gone from his face. Hobart handed me a second rifle from the rack. No two weapons are ever the same, but these two were as near to twins as I've ever handled. I broke a second target, and then a third with yet another rifle. Kirk didn't bother to conceal a smirk of satisfaction. "Well, Sergeant," he said to Hobart, "what do you think?"

"I think the gentleman shows promise," Hobart nodded.

"Does that mean I'm hired?" I asked.

"Not quite," Kirk said. "There's still the matter of the iron bird." He turned to what I'd assumed was a cart draped with a dropcloth and snatched the cover off with a flourish worthy of Manolete.

"Mitch, meet the star performer on our team. The 17th Michigan's ten-pound Parrott."

"Good God," I said. It was a cannon. A full-sized Civil War relic, a six-and-a-half-foot black-steel gunbarrel, reinforced at the breech with a thick metal strap, mounted on a wooden gun carriage of twin wagon wheels and a towing yoke that rested on the ground behind it. "It looks almost new."

"It is new, or nearly so. It's a replica of the Model 1861 ten-pound Parrott field rifle, named after Robert P. Parrott, superintendent of the West Point Foundry. It's the same model cannon my great-great-grandfather's unit used in the Civil War. The ten pounds refers to the weight of the shell, though in competition we're limited to five-pound loads or less."

"Competition?" I said. "You mean this thing actually shoots?"

"Surely you jest." Kirk grinned. "Stand clear." He knelt by the breech of the weapon, inserted a tubular gunsight in a slot. At Kirk's direction, Hobart nudged the gun's tail a hair to the left with a wooden bar he'd inserted in a ring obviously meant for it. Kirk nodded, elevated the barrel a bit with a brass wheel mounted on the carriage, inserted a small pin in the breech with a lanyard attached to it, took a final sighting, then stepped away from the gun. "Ready to fire," he said formally.

I covered my ears without being told. "Fire," Kirk said, and jerked the lanyard. The cannon leapt back with a sharp bark and a billow of white smoke. Down range at a hundred yards, a three-inch rifle target puffed into red vapor.

"I'll be damned," I said softly.

"Probably," Hobart said. "But what do you think of the gun?"

"I'm very impressed," I said, meaning it.

"Impressed enough to want to join the team?" Kirk asked.

"Yeah," I nodded, "I think so. What do I have to do exactly?"

"Shoot in the skirmish events, drill with the gun crew, maybe march in a parade two or three times a year," Kirk said. "For which you'll be paid the enlistment bounty, plus a monthly wage, plus cash bonuses if you win any marksmanship trophies in the individual competitions. You'll be carried on the books as a part-time employee in Deveraux Optimetrics security section. Any problem with that?"

"Maybe for my bookkeeper," I said, "not for me. Gentlemen, you've just hired yourselves a sniper . . ."

I knew when I signed the contract that the deal was probably too good to be true, and it was. For openers, a week after I joined the squad somebody torched my car.

I liked that car. A '69 Camaro convertible, crude Motown iron, but everything worked and I could fix what didn't myself. Somebody pried off the gas-cap cover, stuffed an oily rag in the fuel-tank filler neck, lit it, and ran. A passerby caught a glimpse of the torch—a big guy in T-shirt and jeans, not much help. The fire department doused the fire, but the car was a total loss.

The firebug could have been anybody, of course—a disgruntled drunk I'd bounced at some point, a kid on a rip, or just somebody who liked fires. I told the cops I had no idea who'd done it, then checked with Harry Klecko's landlady on my own. She told me he'd left the day before to take a job in Detroit. Not much of an alibi; on the other hand, maybe he didn't need one. I didn't have time to chase down to Motown to ask him, but I promised myself that the next time I saw him we'd discuss the matter. In depth. In an alley.

The skirmish team was no frolic in the park either. Kirk wanted the most accurate Civil War rifle and artillery squad on the planet, and he wanted it yesterday. He was impatient, insensitive, and could be a sarcastic twit when things didn't happen precisely on schedule. He reminded me of every green officer I'd ever served with. The supposedly monthly drills were held weekly, and he drove us hard. We trained in volley firing with the muskets, honing our accuracy to murderous perfection until we were nearly as good with the antiquated rifles as we'd been with M-16s. Which was very good indeed.

Handling the Parrott was the easy part, at least for me. As new man on the squad, I drew the lowliest job, powder monkey, which simply meant taking the black powder charges out of the haversack and passing them to Dinwiddie, the loader. Since the loads were all painstakingly carefully premeasured by Kirk and triple-wrapped in tinfoil, I didn't even get dirty. Still, I griped now and then. We all did, mostly just to make Kirk feel like he was a hard guy. The truth is, after the first few weeks we were having one helluva good time.

The other guys on the team were solid, all Viet Nam vets, all ex-army but the two Sterleski brothers, who were ex-marines, and one ex-SEAL, me. We didn't become instant buddies, but the after-drill beer-and-bull sessions gradually became a high point of my week.

Compared to the muddled violence of war, skirmish-team soldiering was pure catharsis. We were getting paid serious money to

practice skills we'd acquired under life-and-death pressure, and there was a wonderful release in knowing it was all a game now, the killing was over, and nobody would get hurt. Or so we thought.

The summer fled past in a blur of six-day workweeks at the Nest with Sundays spent drilling with the team. Our first serious match was scheduled for Labor Day weekend, and by mid-August we were so sharp that Kirk relented and cut the drills back to every other Sunday. Whoopee.

I saw Andrea again, twice. A week after I joined the squad, she stopped by the Nest. We sat out on the deck overlooking the lake and chatted most of a sun-dappled afternoon away. I'd forgotten how much fun she was as a dinner date, as long as you weren't on the menu.

The second time we met for lunch, her Florida boyfriend just happened along and joined us. A charming guy, Craddock—funny, reasonably bright, and undeniably a better match for Andrea than I'd ever been. There was no need for him to feel threatened, but I got the impression that he did, primarily because he phoned me that night and told me to stay away from Andrea or he'd break my back. Or words to that effect.

I told him to stuff himself, but I needn't have bothered. I phoned several times but Andrea never answered or returned my calls.

I worked like a hod carrier Labor Day weekend, pulling double shifts at the Crow's Nest, trying to squeeze the final few drops of tourist juice out of the last rosé of summer. By Monday I was whipped, body and spirit, so naturally I had to get up at six in the morning, fumble into my skirmisher's outfit, and drive ninety miles west to Birch City to march in their Labor Day parade.

Birch City's a little tourist trap on the Lake Michigan shore, a mile-long strip of motels, restaurants, trailer courts, and marinas. The year-round population is probably only a few thousand, but there must have been twenty times that many people crammed into the town and the surrounding parks and campgrounds.

I had to park a half mile outside the village limits and hike in. I didn't feel a bit out of place, since several hundred other guys in uniform were doing the same thing. The little town looked like Secesh Fever was breaking out all over again. The houses, the bus-stop benches, even the lampposts were bedecked with flags and bunting and the streets were teeming with soldiers. I knew there'd be

other squads there—it was a match, after all—but I never dreamed there'd be so many of them.

I found the 17th Michigan in the Holiday Inn parking lot, and none too soon. The guys were already formed up, standing at ease. I took my spot, earning a glower from Kirk, but no comment. He was wired, pacing nervously, adjusting and then readjusting the rake of his forage cap, the angle of his saber, edgy as a recruit before his first battle, which I suppose in a way he was.

The parade started nearly an hour late, but it was worth the wait. A drum and bugle corps brought everyone to attention with the Star Spangled Banner, then stepped off smartly, playing "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," followed by a color guard, and then the skirmishers' column, nearly four hundred strong in uniforms roughly divided between North and South. We marched through the little town in good order, a brisk breeze off the lake whipping the banners, people cheering and applauding as we passed, taking pictures, holding their children up to give them a better view.

It should have been a hoot.

Regular army troops seldom march, and never in combat zones like Viet Nam. They make too tempting a target. Outside of basic training, I'd never marched anywhere when I was in the service, ever. So here I was, twenty years later, tramping through a hick town on Labor Day with four hundred weekend warriors in uniforms a hundred years out of date. Send in the clowns, right?

But somehow it wasn't like that. None of the guys on our skirmish team were John Wayne types. We were just small-town boys who enlisted because that's what small-town boys did back then. The war had been on for a while, so we knew what we were getting into, or thought we did. Only our families saw us off, and when we came back stateside the debriefing officers suggested we change into civilian clothes before leaving the base. No big deal. We were professionals. We knew the score. And yet—

In our heart of hearts, this harebrained parade was what we hoped coming home would be like. Girls in summer dresses and the rumble of drums and old men saluting the colors and kids darting through our lines. And suddenly my eyes were misting and an iron fist clamped around my heart so fiercely I could barely breathe. And I'm not sure whether I was mourning my own loss of innocence or for guys who'd bought the farm and never heard a cheer. But as I glanced along our rank, I knew I wasn't the only one who'd been shaken by this nonsense. Maybe to Birch City it was just another

Labor Day parade, but to our little clan it meant more. A lot more.

The beauty queens and the floats dropped out of the parade at a supermarket parking lot just north of town, but the column of troops continued the march another half mile to a large open park-and-picnic area atop a line of bluffs along the Lake Michigan shore. The cannons were already there—three bronze Napoleons and a couple of howitzers, their muzzles pointed out over the waves. We marched past them, the squads falling out as they reached a paper pennant with their unit name on it. The 17th Michigan formed up at our ten-pound Parrott. Along the firing line of skirmish teams there was a lot of racket—war whoops and good-natured abuse and laughter and rebel yells. But not from our squad. We were somber as a burial party.

“Guys, gather round,” Hobart said after we’d stacked our weapons in a rack away from the ten-pounder, “we’ve got a problem.”

“The parade marshal’s informed me they’re changing the events a little because of the crowds,” Kirk said uneasily. “They’re afraid to let us fire downrange—too many people in the area. We’ll be firing offshore instead, at those jugs out there.”

I followed his gesture. There were two lines of ordinary one-gallon plastic milk jugs bobbing unevenly on the choppy waves, the first line about a hundred yards out, the second fifty yards farther. “That’s going to be a tough shot,” I said. “It may not look it from here, but I’d estimate those swells at eighteen to twenty inches. If you don’t time your shot, you can aim dead on and still miss by a foot high or low.”

Kirk nodded. “That’s how I see it, and as the only seaman on the squad, you’re elected to make sure we don’t miss.”

“You mean you want me to shoot?”

“No, I’ll aim the gun to strike at the wave crest—you just time the rise and fall of the waves and tell me when to fire.”

“You got it,” I said.

We ran through our safety check, then waited impatiently while a sheriff’s patrol launch escorted a curious catboat out of the target area. We were pumped and hungry, eager to put all our drilling to the test. The Birch City mayor made a short speech over a makeshift public-address system welcoming everybody to the Labor Day celebration and said they were going to start the show off with a bang—the cannon events. The range marshal gave a quick rundown of the regs, then sounded the loading whistle.

Hobart swabbed the barrel down as a safety precaution, then I passed a tinfoil-wrapped load and shell to Dinwiddie, who placed them in the muzzle. Hobart rammed them home while Dale Sterleski held a leather pad over the primer vent to prevent misfires. Kirk sighted the gun and gave Gary Cox precise instructions, adjusting the trailer yoke until the Parrott was centered on the target. He yelled "Ready!" and everyone stepped away from the gun. Dale pierced the tinfoil with a narrow-vent pick. Cox inserted the primer, then passed the lanyard to Kirk and stood clear. Kirk took a final sight check and stepped back. "Ready to fire," he said, "on your signal."

I concentrated, trying to time the rise and fall of the damned jug and factor in the second or so it would take the shot to arrive.

"What's the holdup?" Kirk snapped.

I didn't answer, dazzled by the beauty of the afternoon, waves jostling out on the bay, sunlight glittering on the whitecaps, the noise of the crowd. Then a field gun boomed down the line, kicking up a roostertail of spray just beyond the targets, snapping my reverie, bringing me into total concentration on the line of jugs dancing on the chop. On our target.

"Now!" I said.

"Fire!" Kirk shouted, jerking the lanyard. The Parrott roared and rocked back on its wheels. A hundred yards offshore, our jug bucked upward, then sank out of sight.

"A hit!" Dinwiddie yelled. "We drilled it!"

The firing continued along the line, but the choppy waves made it tricky business. Only two other teams scored hits on their first rounds. We tensely waited out the required three-minute safety pause, then we repeated the loading-and-aiming drill and Kirk took the lanyard.

It took me a bit longer to nail the timing of our more distant target down. The offshore breeze was picking up, nipping off the tops of the whitecaps, making the jugs twitch sideways as well as vertically. A cannon roared down the line, then another. White spumes of spray shot skyward out in the bay. No hits. It was going to be a tough shot and—

"Damn it, Mitch—" Kirk began.

"Now!" I said. "Fire!"

Kirk jerked the lanyard, and the gun exploded with a world-shattering blast, hammering Kirk into me, hurling us backward like the earth had bucked us off. I don't remember hitting the ground . . .

Kirk was leaning over my bed, whispering. His lips were moving but I couldn't understand him over the crackling roar in my head. He'd aged terribly, his face gaunt as a skull, his skin weathered, hair completely grey. I blinked hard, bringing the face into focus. Not Kirk. His father. Jason Deveraux.

For a moment I couldn't remember if Jason was alive. He seemed to be, and as waves of pain began to crash over me I decided that I must be, too.

I glanced warily around the room, moving only my eyes. Hospital. Pastel-green walls. Another bed, empty. A picture hanging beside the door of Jesus in the garden. Jason was saying something, but I still couldn't—I reached up, took the foam shooting plugs out of my ears, and stared numbly down at my arms. They were spattered with blood smears.

"It's all right, Mitch," Jason said, placing his hand over mine, "the blood's not yours. You're going to be all right." There was a tall, fair-haired man in uniform standing behind him. Not Union or Confederate. Michigan State Police.

"Mr. Mitchell?" the cop said. "I'm Lieutenant Beck. Do you feel up to talking? Can you tell us what happened?"

"The gun must have blown up," I said numbly.

"Yes, sir," the cop said, a bit impatiently, "it did. But do you have any idea why? What went wrong, Mr. Mitchell?"

Jason stepped away from the bed, moving off to the policeman's left, slightly behind him. I don't think I'd seen him more than a few times over the years. He looked terrible—gaunt, haggard, the front of his suit rumpled and bloodstained—and yet he still seemed as Controlled and forceful as ever. His eyes met mine and he shook his head—a barely perceptible movement, but enough.

"I don't know," I said slowly, "I can't seem to . . ." I closed my eyes, sagged back on the pillow, pretended to fade out. It wasn't hard.

"Mr. Mitchell?"

"Lieutenant, let him rest, please," Jason said. "He's in no condition to talk now. Why don't you see to some of the others? I'll call you when he comes around again."

The cop protested, but only mildly. Jason Deveraux is a hard man to say no to.

"Mitch," Jason said quietly, "can you hear me?"

I blinked awake, tried to sit up, couldn't quite manage. "What happened?" I said. "How are the others?"

"Dinwiddie's dead," he said, swallowing, "and one of the Sterleski boys, too. Jack Hobart's legs are broken, apparently from a flying wheel. Gary Cox and the other boy are banged up pretty badly, but they should be all right. You've got a broken nose, bruised ribs, and a concussion."

"Kirk?" I said.

"He's—ahm, he's dead," Jason said, turning away. "God. I barely recognized him."

"He was between me and the gun," I said.

"Yes." Jason nodded, turning to face me, his eyes dark and empty as the Parrott's bore. "He took the full force of the blast. You'd probably be dead otherwise. Mitch, do you have any idea what happened?"

"I—don't think it was an accident," I said slowly. "It couldn't have been."

"Why not?"

"The gun was modern steel, and we were using half charges. There's no way that much black powder could've blown it apart like that."

"That's what Jack Hobart said." Jason sat down beside the bed. "Listen to me, Mitch. I don't want you to tell the police anything."
"What?"

"I mean it. They think it's an accident for the moment. They probably won't guess otherwise until their lab in Lansing examines the gun. Which gives us a little time."

"I don't understand," I said.

"It's as old as the Bible, Mitch. I know what you did in the war, and what Hobart did. I want you to find out who did this thing. And I want them killed. I'll pay you anything you ask. Anything."

"You don't know what you're saying," I said.

"Don't patronize me, Mitchell!" he flared. "We both know what passes for *justice* these days. Hell, I keep lawyers on retainer who can play the court system like a grand piano. Even if the police manage to convict the bastard who did this, he'll just sit in a little room watching TV for a few years while my son—" He broke off, swallowing his pain, and some of his rage. "Damn it, Mitch, Kirk was your friend!"

"They were all my friends," I said. "Look, Mr. Deveraux, I know you're hurting. So am I. Maybe we'd better not talk any more now. I'm very tired."

He stared at me, hard, for what seemed like a century. "Yes, of course you are," he said at last, getting unsteadily to his feet. "I'm sorry, I'd better go. My wife—" He shook his head slowly, then turned and shambled out like a mechanical man whose joints were rusting in the rain. I'd known him all my life, and admired him. To have him offer me money to kill someone— He was grieving, of course. He didn't know what he was saying. Still, I couldn't fault his logic.

A few years' confinement wouldn't be payment enough for Kirk and the others. It was, after all, an act of war. And maybe a life wouldn't be payment enough. But it would have to do.

"You look almost as bad as I feel," Hobart said.

"I'm all right," I told him, easing down on the salmon-pink plastic chair beside his bed. "At least I can get around all right. How about you?"

"I'll be flat on my back here for a few weeks, then crutches for as long as it takes." Hobart's freckled skin was bloodless, waxen. His red hair looked mangy—scorched patches on his scalp were smeared with greasy white antibiotic salve.

"What can you tell me about what happened?" I asked.

He shifted his head painfully to meet my eyes. "The old man told me you turned him down."

"He's half right," I said evenly. "I turned down the money. And as far as I'm concerned, we're just talking."

"Fair enough," Hobart said, closing his eyes, sinking back into his pillow. "For openers, it was definitely no accident. I saw the Parrott, or what was left of it, when they were hauling me away. It was smashed like dime-store china. Whoever did it used C-4."

"Why do you think it was C-4?"

"I don't think, I know. I smelled it, *eau de plastique*. It was C-4, all right, probably in the powder charge. You handled the load, right? Anything odd about it?"

"No. We had twenty rounds packed in the haversack, all triple-wrapped in tinfoil. I didn't notice anything unusual."

"Almost had to be in the load, though. If it had been hidden on the carriage it would have blown the gun off, but not shattered it. Tough weapon, that Parrott. Which means you don't have much time. It won't take the State Police lab long to figure out what happened and then they'll be all over this thing."

"I expect so. Okay, suppose we try to narrow it down. You're in charge of Deveraux Optimetrics security. Any chance this could have been a business thing? A competitor, maybe?"

"No," he said positively. "We do classified defense work, but there's nothing crucial about it, and killing Kirk won't change a thing. All our contracts are held by the corporation. No, I think this had to be personal. And I'm not so sure Kirk was the target. It could have been any of us. You, for instance."

"Why me?"

"You're the guy with the flammable car."

"True," I admitted, "but that was just vandalism. It wasn't intended to hurt anybody."

"Maybe it was a warning. And maybe you should have listened. Do you have any enemies?"

"If you mean guys who might torch my car, sure. I run a bar. Occasionally I have to bounce a rowdy, and one of them could've tried to get back at me by trashing my car or whatever. But they couldn't have done this. For one thing, you can't buy C-4 at your local supermarket. Our guy probably got the stuff from the greenhouse, which narrows the list considerably. To Harry Klecko, for instance. Did he know the C-4 was there?"

Hobart's eyes blinked open. "Probably. He was out there a few times for drills. Do you think he'd be capable of something like this?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. "Harry's always been one mean bastard. I wouldn't be surprised if he torched my car—that'd be his style. And since he knew about the C-4, he'll definitely be one of the people I talk to about this, close up and personal. But I don't think he'd top my list. What about Kirk's brother Brad?"

"What about him?"

"As I understand it, Brad just has a token job at the company. Maybe it bothers him, seeing his punk little brother running the show, playing war games while he gimps along in his shadow. Maybe he decided to move up and give Kirk a taste of real war at the same time."

"No chance," Hobart said definitely. "None. For one thing, any time Brad wants a better job, all he has to do is ask. He and the old man are on the outs, but he's still a Deveraux."

"What do you mean, they're on the outs?"

"Over Brad's wife," Hobart said. "The old man hates Orientals. Spent some time in a North Korean prison camp in '54. Showed me

the scars once. He's civil to Meiling, but that's about all he can manage."

"Then how about Brad's wife? Just because he's not ambitious doesn't mean she isn't."

"No, I just don't think so. If either of them really wanted to get onto the fast track, they could just as easily have chosen a Caucasian boy to adopt a few months back and given the old man a grandson. Hell, with their money they could've adopted a Martian if they'd wanted one, but they took a Vietnamese girl who can barely speak English. Forget about them. No way."

"Fair enough," I said. "How much do you know about Andrea's fiancé, Tony Craddock?"

"Not much. Just that he was selling Porsches down in Miami when Andrea met him. Why?"

"It occurred to me that a guy who's about to marry the boss's daughter might decide to create a job opening at the top and eliminate a potential rival with one bang."

"That's a lot of ifs," Hobart said. "For openers, Jason can't stand the guy. I doubt he'll do much for him even if he marries into the family."

"Maybe not. But Jason's an old-fashioned gentleman and Craddock doesn't strike me as overly perceptive. The question is, is Craddock bright enough to sense how the old man feels? Or does he dig his own act enough to think everyone else buys it, too?"

"Could be," Hobart said, chewing his lower lip. "I don't know much about him, but I can make a few calls and find out. Meanwhile, there's something you'd better check on."

"What's that?"

"The C-4," Hobart said. "We've limited our list to guys who knew the stuff was in the greenhouse. But if it came from somewhere else—?"

"I see your point. All right, I'll check it. How will I know if there's any missing?"

"We only had one five-pound box and used less than half a brick. If there's more missing than that, we'll know where it went. And one way or another, we'll take it from there."

"Right," I said. "One way or another."

I used Hobart's passcard to get through the Deveraux estate's electronic front gate and parked in front of the house. A maid an-

swered the bell, a pudgy Latin woman in a Prussian-blue uniform with an attitude to match.

"The family's not at home, sir. There's just myself and the girls, and I have instructions not to let anyone in."

"No problem, ma'am. I'm Mr. Mitchell. Mr. Hobart asked me to pick up something from the greenhouse. I just wanted to let you know I was here. I'll see myself out."

She didn't bother to reply. I made my way around back. The day was nearly as dark as my mood, ebony thunderheads drifting down from the Black River hills, an uneasy tension in the air, thunder muttering in the distance like the rumble of field guns a hundred years away.

The lawn stretched ahead of me like an immaculately barbered sea of green, and it occurred to me that some of the happiest times of my youth had been spent on these grounds—with Andrea, or just working, enjoying the beauty of the estate, the hill-country air. It didn't feel friendly anymore. It was the land of the local lord, and I was trespassing.

I unlocked the greenhouse with Hobart's key, stepped in, and hit the light switch. The overhead fluorescents flickered to life, erasing the shadows. Strategically placed floods highlighted the dioramas and the weapons displays.

Slaughter.

That's what this room was really all about. Not history, not valor or tactics or even technology. If you looked past the special effects, the artistry of it all, the museum's theme was death. Each of the weapons in the racks owed its existence to ingenuity and sweat and craftsmanship in the pursuit of more efficient killing, and the dioramas artfully depicted the fields and villages where that killing took place. I wondered how many deaths this room represented. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps. Maybe millions. And from this perspective, as though from a great height, the way politicians and strategists saw it, those numbers had no real significance.

Unless you were one of them. Or your friends were. A million deaths. And now a million plus three. And maybe I couldn't do anything about the other killings so meticulously displayed here, but somebody was going to pay for these last.

I made my way back to the workbench where Kirk had measured the loads for the Parrott, noting again how impeccably neat it all was, a reflection of the man who used it. The box of C-4 was stored beneath the An Loc diorama table near the bench, safe as houses.

It only took a glance at the white-clay packets wrapped in wax paper to know that there was a lot more of the stuff missing than the half a brick Hobart said they used.

So that's how it was done. Somebody had taken a fistful of C-4 clay, rolled it neatly to the proper size, wrapped it in tinfoil, then either mixed it in with the stack on the bench or slipped it into the haversack. I straightened up slowly, then hesitated, feeling something grind beneath my shoe. Gunpowder. Not much, just a trace—but it shouldn't have been there at all.

I knelt back down, glanced around. There was more of it. Somebody'd tried to sweep it up, but they'd missed a few spots. There was a small charcoal-grey dustpile under the bench and I could see more powder glittering beneath the grids of the drain cover. Somebody'd been careless, and I knew it wouldn't have been Kirk. C-4 is almost totally inert—nothing short of a lightning bolt or a major fire would set it off. But loose gunpowder? A spark of static electricity or a cigarette ash, and boom! If Kirk had spilled powder, he absolutely would have cleaned up every last grain. Sloppy work.

I straightened up slowly, thinking. Both Harry Klecko and Brad Deveraux were ex-soldiers who'd know how dangerous loose powder is. But Craddock? I wondered how much he knew about munitions.

I took a final look around, didn't see anything else out of place. I started for the door. But paused with my hand over the light switch. There *was* something else out of place. Or at least different. I walked cautiously back to the bench and scanned every square inch of it again, then the floor around it. Zilch. Other than the powder traces on the floor, nothing was wrong, it was all—

That was it. Nothing was wrong. Something was right. I stepped over to the An Loc diorama table. Everything was as before—the villages, the pedicabs so realistic I could almost smell the spices and the charcoal smoke from the marketplace. It all looked so true to life it took me a minute to figure out what had been changed. There were two small buildings along the roads leading to the village. They belonged there, but still—I picked one of them up. The carving of the figure inside was well done. I knew exactly what it represented. But the scale wasn't quite right. And it wasn't painted.

I looked at the diorama again, and this time realized how different it really was.

She was sitting alone at the table on the veranda where we'd first been introduced. Her sister was out on the tennis court, returning

the serves of a machine. Lin Lin was dressed in tennis whites and a racket was leaning against her chair, but she was far more interested in the book she was reading. Doctor Seuss. She was tracing the sentences with her fingertip, her lips moving, silently forming the unfamiliar words.

"Hi," I said. "Remember me?"

She started as though I'd touched her with a cattle prod. The *poing* of her sister's racket and the hum of the vacuum from the house must have camouflaged my approach. "It's okay," I said, easing down on a chair across the table from her, "I'm Mr. Mitchell, your Aunt Andrea's friend, remember?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly, "I remember. How are you?"

"Fine," I said, "just fine. But I'd like to talk to you for a minute." I reached across the table and carefully placed the miniature white building beside her book. "You do wonderful work. I remember seeing shrines like this when I lived in Viet Nam, but I can't recall the lady's name who lives inside. What is she called?"

I don't know why some people think Orientals are inscrutable. I had no trouble at all reading the despair in Lin Lin's eyes. "It's all right," I said, "you didn't do anything wrong. The village looks much better than before. You did make this, didn't you? And the other figures. Out of the white clay?"

She nodded, once. "Gwan Yin," she said, her voice barely audible.

"That's right," I nodded, "Gwan Yin. The goddess of travelers. I should have remembered. She's very beautiful. Like your new mother. And like you. Tell me, how did you get in there? I thought the building was kept locked."

"A little window," she said, "in the bathroom."

"Of course," I said. "And I understand why you liked being in there so much. It looks so real it makes me homesick, too. Lin Lin, there's something I have to know. It's important. When you were making the goddess and the other figures, did something happen? Did one of the silver packages fall down and spill? Did you fix it? With white clay?" She didn't answer. She didn't have to.

"It's all right," I said absently, rising, "really it is. But, um, we won't tell anyone about this for a while, okay? You have a beautiful home now. You're going to be very happy here, you'll see."

She didn't say anything, and I'd run out of white lies for the moment. I picked up the miniature shrine to the goddess of little travelers and started for my car. But I stopped at the corner of the house for a last look.

Lin Lin was still at the table, desperately trying to comprehend the alien logic of Thidwick the Moose while her older sister was taking the best serves her robot opponent could deliver and hammering them all over the court.

At this distance the greenhouse looked like the place I'd worked in when I was a boy, a haven for flowers and green plants, not a high-tech monument to death and battle and a ten-pound Parrott.

It was odd how my perception of war had changed in the past few weeks from hell to glory and back again. Brad was right, war's not a game. But I'll never forget how fine it felt to step off with my friends to the thunder of drums. Or what came of it. What always comes of it.

Which in a way illustrates my problem. I've known Jason Deveraux most of my life. He's a charming, hardnosed son of a bitch and I've always liked him. But I realize that my impression of him, like the dream of war, was formed a long time ago.

I'll have to tell him what happened. He'll never let it go, until he knows and he might as well hear it from me. It was a childish accident, Kirk playing at war and Lin Lin trying to play her way home.

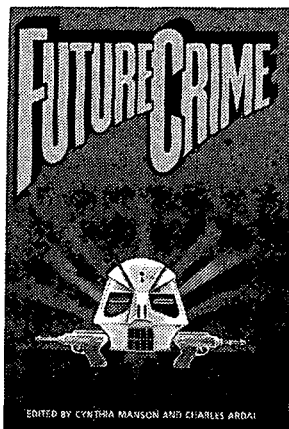
I think basically he's a decent man and he'll handle it well. God help us both if I'm wrong.

"Q"

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TO CELEBRATE THE BIRTHDAY OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

Is Sherlock Holmes alive and settled in comfortable retirement in Sussex, raising bees? So say the Baker Street Irregulars, who meet annually to celebrate the January 6 birthday of the great sleuth. It is no coincidence that the day Sherlockians claim is Holmes's birthday is also Twelfth-night, for the mention of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night twice in the Holmes canon is one of the arcane pieces of evidence by which the date was fixed. This year Holmes turns 138 according to the Baker Street Irregulars; their January 10 dinner in his honor is one of the traditions of the organization, which was formed in 1934 and has had many illustrious members, including Ellery Queen.

The relationship between Holmes and Dr. Watson has inspired countless detective tales—stories that are in themselves a tribute to the famous detective. Such a story is Miriam Biskin's "A Spy By Any Other Name," although here we find a "Holmes" of a very different stripe.

Miriam Biskin is a retired English teacher whose detectiverse "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" appeared in the March, 1987 issue of EQMM . . .

A SPY BY ANY OTHER NAME

by MIRIAM BISKIN

It was during the last months of 1944, and it seemed as if the war had lasted forever. Despite all reassurances, we still worried about the U-boats that might be stalking our coasts. We had not forgotten those early days when blood mingled with oil, darkening the warm blue waters, and bodies washed ashore on the white beaches. Stories of possible espionage seemed to be part of the air

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we breathed. The President's words during his radio chats were tired and his face in the newspaper was drawn, and I, for one, felt scared and lonely.

In our beleaguered paradise, time hung heavy. Even though the place was full of soldiers and sailors from the base, none of them were around long enough for me to find one to fall in love with. I had read every book in the library and seen every available movie, and every evening when I walked down to Mallory Square to watch the sun set beyond the far horizon, I came to the conclusion that sunsets weren't all that romantic for someone who was all alone. There was a song on the radio that described my life perfectly—all of the men were either too young, like my high-school sophomore English class, or too old, like my Dad's old friend, Police Sergeant Watson.

There was a time when the three of us would meet for coffee every morning in a little place off Duval Street, and then suddenly Dad died, and that left just me and Watson keeping up that old habit. We talked about everything—the weather, the war, even what I was planning to teach my class that day.

"You're kidding," he said, "teaching those kids that they can find clues in names."

"It is a tried and true literary technique," I protested. "Like Mary Poppins, the nursemaid who popped in, and Scarlett O'Hara—"

"With her scarlet reputation," said my friend, who had an irritating habit of finishing my sentences. "Isn't that a bit too obvious?"

"There are plenty of real-life examples," I continued, "like Iceland that's frigid—"

"And Greenland that isn't green and the deadly Cape of Good Hope."

"What about us?" I countered.

"What about us?"

"Well, you are D.R. Watson, and your friends all call you Doc, and I am S. Holmes."

"Sara, my name is really Daniel, and you are no Sherlock, and together we are a far cry from the famous detectives."

"I do help on occasion," I said softly, tactfully not mentioning all the times my research skills had helped him.

"Hmph," snorted my friend, deliberately making a barricade of his morning paper. I hated myself for even trying to have a sane discussion with such an old coot, and since he wasn't about to offer

anything that might soothe my wounded pride, I began to pack up my belongings to leave.

"Don't be so noisy," he said. "I'm thinking." I wondered why I had anything to do with someone who must be the rudest man on earth.

"Why would anyone murder a mailman?" he asked of no one in particular, and much as I wanted to remain aloof, I leaned over his shoulder to read the morning headlines. For three days now, the stories of the Allied troops taking Antwerp from the Nazis had been replaced by the details of a local homicide.

"Frank didn't have an enemy in the world," I said.

"He had at least one," said Watson, "a real pro who got him with one shot between the eyes."

"He was the quietest boy in my high-school class," I said. "We couldn't believe it when he enlisted right after graduation. One of the first to go, and one of the first to come back . . . and quieter than ever."

"Well," said Watson, "it's not easy to adjust to the loss of a leg. That boy was a real hero, but he wanted no special treatment—wouldn't even take an inside job at the post office. Insisted on an outside route delivering letters. A stubborn cuss."

"Just like a detective I know," I said. "Someone who could take it a lot easier at his age."

"You needn't get so smart. Just because I'm too old for the service doesn't mean I can't do my part here."

Poor Sergeant Watson, I thought, too old for the military, and poor Frank, too crippled, and poor me, too young to be stuck in this small town that even the tourists had forsaken.

"Shall I meet you later at the Carter house?" I asked.

"Only if you promise not to play detective," he answered.

I nodded, but I didn't promise.

The Carter house was just like so many other fine old places in Key West, basic Bahamian with its peaked roof and green shutters. People were already lined up on the narrow porch waiting to pass through the open doorway to view the remains of the deceased laid out in an open mahogany coffin.

"He looks very peaceful, Mrs. Carter," Watson murmured to the white-haired woman standing rigidly at its side.

"Very peaceful," I echoed.

"Oh, Mr. Watson—Miss Holmes," she cried, "you were Frank's friends—please find out who did this."

"The department will do its very best," Watson said.

"We will certainly try," I added, ignoring Watson's scowl at my use of "we."

"I told him he should find a nice girl like you, and not get involved with that awful Mattie Harris."

From the surprised look on Watson's face, I could tell that this was a new piece of information, and I could hardly wait to pursue the matter.

"Who is she?" I asked later. "And what was she to Frank?"

"She was Matilda Zeller—married a young sailor named Harris who was killed in action. Back in town, living with her folks."

"Are they the same people who own the German bakery near the army base?"

"Yes, my dear, they are, but if you are looking for spies, don't bother. They've been living here as long as I can remember, and they are just ordinary hard-working folks."

I wasn't convinced. That name, Mattie Harris, was tailor-made.

Watson must have read my thoughts.

"Forget it," he said. "If all solutions were that obvious, our work would be a cinch."

I didn't dispute his logic. After all, I wanted to stay close to this case.

"How involved was Frank?" I asked.

"The Zeller bakery was on his route. I don't know of any other connection."

"His mother seemed to think there was one," I said. "And you must have some clues."

"Only this," he said, handing me a small black address book from his inside pocket.

As I flipped through the pages, I noted that all the entries were names of soldiers with overseas European army addresses.

"This is odd," I said. "I thought that Frank was originally stationed in the Pacific."

"He was wounded at Pearl Harbor."

"Then why all the addresses in the European Theatre?" I asked. "And what do these three and four digit numbers after each address stand for?"

"We thought it might be a code, but if it is, we haven't found the key. Maybe later we can take another look through Frank's things."

I took that "we" to be an invitation and told Watson blithely that I would meet him at the Carter house that evening. Before he could

answer, I hurried off, my mind totally occupied with thoughts of that little black book. Somehow, there was a message in its pages, but when I stood with Watson later in front of Mrs. Carter's door, I hadn't come up with even a shred of an idea.

"People say such terrible things," she said, her eyes red and puffy from crying. "About how odd that someone his age should live with his mother and that he didn't have a girlfriend."

"Nothing odd about it," said Watson. "He just didn't want his mother to be all alone."

"And that address book with only men's names," she persisted.

"He probably wrote to friends in service," I said. "You know how kind he was."

"Then why did they take his life? My poor boy who never hurt anyone. All he ever did was deliver his mail and read his papers." Her face buried in a handkerchief, she continued to sob. "He spent all his spare time with his newspapers and his maps."

"What maps?" I asked.

"His hobby was keeping track of the hostilities," Watson explained. "As stories appeared in the papers, he marked off the locations on his maps."

"He said the war couldn't end soon enough for him," added Mrs. Carter, her eyes filled with fresh tears. "He said he didn't want anyone else maimed."

"I'd like to see his maps," I said.

"We already checked them out," said Watson.

"I'd really like to see them," I persisted. Mrs. Carter nodded and led us up the narrow staircase to Frank's bedroom, a small room, neat and clean and austere with a tidy single bed, one straight chair, and an old dresser that doubled as a desk. Maps of Europe, studded with colored thumb tacks, covered every wall, reminding me of our old fourth-grade classroom. I could almost imagine old Miss Prym, our teacher, using her pointer to teach an elementary geography lesson.

"Watson, would you please read me one of those entries in the address book," I said.

"Any one?"

"Yes, and with the code number."

Watson must have been struck by the same idea that had come to me because without any questions he read, "Corporal Larry Adams, Battery C, 41st Infantry Battalion, A.P.O. c/o Postmaster, N.Y.—#451."

As he read, I faced the map of Europe and placed my right index finger at 1° west longitude and my left on the 45° north latitude mark and slowly traced straight paths until they met at a red pin.

"That is western France," said Watson. "And the exact location of an infantry battalion according to Frank's map. How about 515?"

"Belgium," I answered. "Five degrees east—west would be water. Whose address is that?"

"Sergeant Jimmy Baxter, 995th Signal Corps," Watson said. "I think we've figured out Frank's system of keeping track of troop movements."

This time I ignored the "we" and simply asked, "Where did he get his information?"

"Delivering the mail," Watson said, as the truth dawned on him. "There was one item in the bottom of his sack, but we thought it was just a letter he hadn't been able to deliver."

As Mrs. Carter and I stood open-mouthed, Watson pulled an envelope from his pocket and read the name of the addressee, Mrs. Matilda Harris, and the address, 451 Miller Road. We could both see the notation which read: INCORRECT ADDRESS—DELIVER TO #292.

"That's Frank's writing," said Mrs. Carter.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Well, if we check out your theory, 451 is the latitude and longitude of Larry Adams's company, and if you check the return address, you will see that the letter comes from Larry Adams. Evidently, Mrs. Harris had worked out a system so that her boyfriends could tell her exactly where they were stationed. She must have figured out that the censors check the contents of the letters but that they have no way of checking out the address on the envelope. And she also knew that in a place as small as this, letters are delivered even if they are incorrectly addressed."

"But she didn't count on the mailman figuring out her little scheme."

"Elementary, my dear Holmes, elementary."

Getting the rest of the proof was simple. As five more misdirected letters arrived at the post office for Mrs. Harris, they were quietly delivered. Watson, now aided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Secret Service, had the bakery under constant surveillance. Together, they tracked one suspiciously frequent patron to a small shack on the edge of town and uncovered a shortwave transmitter and a high-powered rifle easily identified as the murder weapon.

"That bakery near the base was a great place to meet the servicemen who had a few hours of leave," said Watson, "and all she had to do was convince these lovesick fools that she would be happier if they could write and tell her their exact whereabouts. Then she could pass the information to her contact."

"She must have been quite a seductress," I said. "But why didn't Frank turn her in?"

Watson shook his head sadly. "He was still waging his own war, and even though somehow she discovered that he was onto her little game, she never suspected that he was changing her code numbers so that all she received was misinformation. We think that last letter was still in his bag because he hadn't had time to alter the code."

There were a few comments around town when the Harris family suddenly closed up shop and left town. Only those close to the case knew that they and their accomplice were being held in a detention center for arraignment. Over our morning coffee, Watson and I read the newspaper stories about the war reaching a decisive point, about the American forces halting the Nazi offensive at the Battle of the Bulge. Many military experts commented on the expertise of our venture and speculated on the possibility of a breakdown in German intelligence.

"Frank was a hero," said Watson. "A real spy catcher."

"Kind of like history repeating itself," I said, unable to resist one final comment. "Mattie Harris . . . Mata Hari . . . what an improbable coincidence."



a **NEW** short story by

CLARK HOWARD

Recently, at a secondhand book sale, I ran across a 1940 edition of High Sierra, by W. R. Burnett. This book, to my mind, is the finest piece of crime writing ever done, by the man whom I consider the foremost crime writer who ever lived (and please understand that I distinguish crime writing from mystery writing; I consider them two distinct genres, although they sometimes overlap).

I had read High Sierra several times in the half-century since Mr. Burnett wrote it, but did not have a copy in my library, so I bought the secondhand book, intending to just put it on the shelf. Of course, I did not; instead, I immediately started reading it again. The latest reading of this masterpiece inspired the short story "The Last High Mountain." I would like to dedicate this piece to the memory of the master crime writer of our time, W. R. Burnett.

Clark Howard

THE LAST HIGH MOUNTAIN

Earl Buck got off the Trailways bus at the town cafe that doubled as a passenger rest stop and found a Haivodika kid named Cesar waiting for him. When Earl had last seen him on the reservation, Cesar had been about thirteen, skinny and gawky; now he was about nineteen, skinny and gawky. He was a breed like Earl: half Haivodika, a dove-eater. Earl was one-quarter Tukudika, a sheep-eater. Both were Shoshone.

"Hey, Earl," the kid said with a smile that showed a mouthful of flawlessly white but grotesquely crooked teeth.

"How's it going, Cesar," Earl said. His quick black eyes measured the dove-eater. "You got tall."

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"You got bigger," Cesar said, looking at the sculpted chest and muscular arms that filled out Earl's short-sleeved denim shirt.

"Pumping iron," Earl said. "Only way to keep from going fat on all that starchy food. I can do a hundred fingertip push-ups without stopping."

Cesar whistled softly in admiration. Earl fell in step beside him and they started down the town's main street, a six-block-long strip that was twenty percent legitimate businesses for the permanent residents and eighty percent topless bars and massage parlors and quickie motels to serve the Air Force enlisted men from the Rattlesnake Hills missile base thirty miles away.

"Town ain't changed much," Earl noted.

"It's going to pretty soon," Cesar said. "Government's closing the base."

"I read in the paper they was thinking about it. Is it a sure thing?"

"Max says it is. He ought to know—he's on the Chamber of Commerce."

Earl glanced at Cesar. "You working for Max now?"

"Yeah. Just errands and stuff, nothing heavy. He's friends with my mother, so he won't let me get into nothing heavy."

"Just as well," Earl told him soberly. "Heavy stuff don't lead nowhere but Rawlins, kid." Rawlins was the site of the Wyoming State Penitentiary. "Max send you to meet me?"

"Yeah. He said tell you he'd be at the club until midnight. Said tell you to come on by when you got settled. There's a room for you at the Happy Teepee Motel. And Max said to give you this—" He handed Earl an envelope folded over once. Earl nodded and stuck it in his jeans pocket without checking the contents. It would be money, he knew, and it would be enough. Max was no piker.

As they walked, Earl looked off at the nearby Wind River range, behind which the sun had already dropped, and wondered idly whether he could still tell time by the color of the western sky. He knew it was just after four o'clock, because his bus had arrived at four, but could he have determined that *without* knowing it? The western sky above the Wind River mountains went from deep-blue, when the sun disappeared completely, to light-blue; to light-grey, to dark-grey, to night. Years ago, his Shoshone grandmother had taught him to tell time by that diffusion of color, but he was not sure whether he could still do it. There were a lot of things he wasn't sure of any more.

Seeing Earl looking at the mountains, Cesar said, "There was a rumor last month that old Togwotee was dead."

Earl gave the younger man a skeptical look. "Anybody see his body?"

"Not that I know of," Cesar admitted.

"Don't believe it until you see his body," Earl advised. He looked at the mountains again, a hint of a frown pinching his eyebrows a fraction closer. Togwotee was the last of the full-blooded Mountain Shoshones, a reclusive tribe that roamed the high valleys and hunted Big Horn sheep for their survival, just as the Plains Indians had once hunted buffalo. Following the Big Horns as they migrated from high valley to timberline for the nutritious mountain grasses, the Tukadikas, or sheep-eaters, as they were called, utilized the sheep in the same way the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne had utilized the buffalo. A Big Horn five feet high, weighing four hundred pounds, provided meat to be eaten fresh or dried; bones and horns for the shaping of weapons and tools; entrails for liquid containers, cooking bags, and pouches; sinew for thread; and hides—tanned with the animal's own brains—for clothing, blankets, and rugs to close the cave entrances against the high altitude cold. Even the sheep's hooves were used, to make combs for the lustrous, long black hair of the men, women, and children of the band. Food, clothing, shelter, tools, weapons; the swift, sure-footed, high-climbing Big Horns provided it all. And Togwotee was the last Tukadika still up there, nine thousand feet high, living just as his ancestors had lived after they crossed the Bering Strait from Asia during the Ice Age.

"I wonder how old he is?" Earl said quietly, as much to himself as to Cesar.

"No telling," Cesar said. "He was an old man when Max was a boy, and Max is an old man now."

"At least once a year since I was a kid," Earl reflected, "there's been a rumor that he was dead. Someday I guess it'll have to be true."

"I guess," the young dove-eater agreed.

At nine that night, wearing a new pair of stone-washed Levis, new western shirt, Atlas boots with riding heels, and a corduroy sportcoat with leather elbow patches, and carrying a sheathed six-inch hunting knife under the side of his belt, Earl strolled the four blocks from the Happy Teepee Motel to the Grand Tetons Club, a twenty-four-hour-a-day topless bar, topless restaurant, topless slot-

machine arcade, topless everything. The day the federal government had started constructing the missile base twenty-five years earlier, Max Rio, a cafe owner and small-time bootlegger with a past, had started building his club. Determined to make it one of the flashiest—and fleshiest—places in what was then a booming little cross-roads eager to reap the profits of the new military facility, Max gave it the same name that French explorers had given the awesome peaks that lay to the west of the town: the Grand Tetons—literally the Big Tits. That was what Max had in his club—everywhere you looked. Waitresses, hostesses, change girls, bar girls, blackjack dealers, cashiers—they were all topless, all big, and (thanks to Max and Mother Nature) all well off. Their tips were as abundant as their bosoms. Young women, both white and Indian, who might have otherwise been earning a minimum wage, if they were lucky enough to have jobs at all, were driving late-model cars and pickups, taking care of kids that husbands had deserted, and putting money in the bank. The Grand Tetons was the most popular club in town.

When Earl got to the club, he walked around back and went in through the kitchen. The head cook, a middle-aged black man named Algernon, smiled when he saw Earl enter. "Hey, boy! Welcome back," he greeted him.

"Hey, Alg."

"Wha's the matter, boy?" the cook asked, smile widening. "How come you ain't coming in the front door, through the club?" He pulled a stern face. "You ain't turned into one of them fairy boys, has you?"

Earl stopped and draped an arm around Algernon's shoulders. "If a man ain't ate candy for six years, he don't go walking through no candy store; he just starts off with a Hershey bar somewheres. Walking through that club would be like opening a five-pound box of chocolates."

Algernon roared with laughter and slapped Earl smartly on the back as Earl took his arm away and walked on past. "A Hershey bar," Earl heard Algernon say behind him. "Tha's a good one! Maybe one with the almonds in just the right places!"

"Now you got it," Earl said over his shoulder.

At the door to Max's office, Earl knocked and heard a voice ask, "Yeah, who is it?" Earl stuck his head in the door.

"Earl Buck, Max."

"Bucky! Come in here, boy!" Max came smiling from behind the desk and shook Earl's hand with both of his own. "Good to see you,

Bucky. By God, you look more like your old man all the time!" Earl's father had been called Bucky, and Max had started calling Earl that after the old man was killed in a car wreck running bootleg hooch onto the reservation. Max himself got away that night.

When the club owner finished shaking Earl's hand, he pulled it up to look at it. On the web between the top knuckles of the thumb and forefinger was a crude jailhouse tattoo in the shape of a triangle extending out from one plane, symbolizing a war club. It was put on a Shoshone's hand only after he had killed an enemy. Max sighed quietly when he saw it.

"I was afraid of that. Not that I didn't expect it. If you're a blood or a breed in Rawlins, I guess it's bound to happen. Who was he?"

Earl shrugged. "Nobody. A biker. Thought young Indians should be punks."

"You take his hair?"

"Just one sideburn. I tied a rawhide boot lace to it and wore it around my neck. When the screws asked me what it was, I said it was a bull's tail my tribal medicine man had sent me. That made it a religious ornament and they couldn't take it away from me."

"Well," Max said resignedly as he walked back behind his desk, "I guess you was bound to draw blood sooner or later." Settling into a big leather executive chair, he said, "Sit down, kid." He opened a bottle of unlabeled gin. "Drink?"

"Just a taste," Earl said, wetting his lips. Max poured an ounce for Earl and three ounces for himself, and they each raised their glasses. "Thanks for getting me out," Earl said. "How'd you do it?"

"A friend of a friend of the governor's pardon secretary," Max replied.

Earl nodded. "Next question is *why'd* you get me out?"

"So's you'd owe me a big favor," Max said with a smile.

They both drank. Earl's first taste of gin in six years was like eating fire. His whole face pinched slightly as he imagined the lining of his mouth and throat being stripped away like old paint under new thinner. "Man—" he whispered hoarsely. Exhaling, he sat back and after a moment asked, "Okay, what's the favor?"

"I want you to stick up the missile base payroll for me."

Max said it blandly. Matter-of-factly. As if he were saying, "Run out and get me a newspaper."

Earl studied him for a moment. Max was greyer, heavier, more florid from drinking too much; his once steely eyes were rheumy, his once rock-steady hands not as sure as Earl remembered them.

Now when Max poured a drink, the bottle clinked against the glass.

And now this: *I want you to stick up the missile base payroll for me.*

Reading the skepticism in Earl's expression, Max said, "I know exactly what you're thinking: Max Rio has finally lost it. But you're wrong. This is a sweet set-up, Bucky, for two reasons. First of all, the next payroll will be the *last* payroll. Before another payday rolls around, all missiles and personnel will have been moved up to Montana and the base down here will be closed. So things are going to be a little loose, a little casual. Everybody will be thinking about the move instead of about tight security for the payroll—"

"I don't know, Max," Earl said doubtfully.

"Just listen. The second thing is this: there's an inside man. A military police major. He's in on it. In fact, he's the one come to me with the idea."

"What's his part?" Earl asked. There was a hint of interest now.

"He gets you and the others onto the base—"

"Others?"

"It's a three-man job. I've already got the other two—"

"I don't know, Max," Earl said again. Two others did not set right with him. Earl was a loner.

"They'll be working for you, don't worry," Max assured him. "You'll be the boss all the way." Max paused a beat for effect, then said, "Your end will be around a hundred thousand bucks."

Earl's lips parted. Max's smile returned. He put a pencil to a pad of paper. "Here's how it breaks down. Nine hundred personnel on the base. Times an average of eight hundred bucks a month. That's seven hundred twenty thousand bucks, no bill bigger than a fifty. The major and I get two hundred and fifty thousand each. The two guys backing you up get fifty thousand apiece. Take twenty thousand off the top for expenses, that leaves an even hundred grand for you, Bucky. That's a lot of dough."

"Yeah," Earl said, almost to himself. He took another sip of the gin; it burned just as badly as the first, but he noticed it less. He remembered a guy in Rawlins who used to subscribe to a real-estate catalog that he passed on to Earl when he was finished with it. In reading it, Earl had found that there were always at least a few small places for sale: ranches, farms, usually just a few acres and an older house, but a start—a place that could be had for sixty or seventy thousand, a place where a man could go and forget a lot of things . . .

Seizing on Earl's reverie, Max said, "Let me get the major in here tomorrow to go over the whole thing with you, kid. It's one sweet plan, you'll see. How about it?"

"Okay, I guess so."

"Good! Tonight you can go meet the other two guys, see what you think of them. They're in my cabin on Bull Lake, pretending to be on a fishing trip. Here," he produced a set of keys, "take my pickup, it's out back—the one with the personalized plates that say 'BIG TTS.' Get it? Big TTs?"

"I get it, Max." Earl put his glass on the desk without finishing the last sip. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure."

"Why the stick-up? You've had this place all these years; you must be loaded—"

"Wrong," Max said at once, raising one hand palm up. "I'm getting by, Bucky, that's all. I make my payroll, take care of the overhead, pay my taxes, send alimony to three ex-wives, and keep two daughters in fancy colleges back East. With what's left, I'm comfortable—but I couldn't put together a big piece of cash if I had to. And after the base closes, this town's gonna go back to being a wide place in the road again. Anyway," he sighed quietly, "I need two hundred grand for something right now. Something important."

Earl nodded slowly. Max took a long swallow of his own gin and stared at the younger man. His eyes narrowed impatiently.

"Ain't you going to ask me what I need it for?" he challenged. Earl shook his head.

"If you say you need it, you need it."

Max pursed his lips in thought for a moment, studying Earl Buck, drumming the fingers of one hand silently on the chair arm. "I'm going to tell you anyway, Bucky," he said at last, "because I want you to know how important this score is to me." Max tapped his head. "I've got a tumor on my brain. It's growing, eating up the healthy tissue around it. I been back to Minnesota to that Mayo place. They want to open me up and cut it out—but they say there's a chance I'll be left with only one side of me working: one arm, one leg, one eye, one ball for all I know. So I passed."

"I'm sorry, Max—"

"Don't be. I still got a card to play." Leaning forward on the desk, his expression became sly. "You ever heard of cryogenics?"

Earl shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Cryogenics," Max said almost reverentially, "is where they freeze a body and keep it in suspension until sometime in the future when they can cure what was killing it."

Earl wanted to smile, but the now rapt expression on Max's face prevented it. Max believed in what he was saying. "They can't really do that, can they?" he asked, keeping his tone neutral.

"Can and *are*," Max said. "There's a place in California called Permanent Life Extension. They've got thirty people suspended right now—people with everything from cancer to heart disease to AIDS. These people will be brought back someday, Bucky—brought back and cured."

"That's what you want the money for? To have that done to yourself?"

"That's it," Max confirmed. "I have to establish an endowment for monitoring, indefinite maintenance, things like that. As soon as I've got the money, I'm going to make all the arrangements." Max wet his lips and reached for the gin glass again. "I can beat this tumor, kid—I know I can. But I need the dough from this score to do it. You can see why it's so important, can't you?"

"Sure, Max," said Earl. He hoped the lie sounded sincere enough.

"I knew you'd understand," the older man said, a hint of relief in his voice. "I knew I could count on you."

Max walked out back with him to the pickup with the personalized license plates. The high summer night air was thin and cool. In the luminous moonlight, the Wind River range loomed over them like great, snow-tipped teepees. Earl thought of the old sheep-eater who had lived up there for so many years.

"Cesar told me there was talk that Togwotee was dead," he said as he got in the truck and Max closed the door.

"Sure, sure," Max grunted quietly. "There's always *talk* that he's dead. Only thing is, there's never no body."

"That's what I told Cesar," Earl allowed. "Maybe Togwotee's suspended like you want to be, Max; frozen in some high mountain cave."

"You don't think I'm crazy, do you, Bucky?" the club owner asked, genuinely concerned.

Earl shook his head. "No, I don't think you're crazy, Max," he told him.

As he drove off, Earl thought: No more than any of the rest of us.

The cabin on Bull Lake was set on a knoll fifty feet back from the water. It had a deck across one side with wooden steps and a walk

leading down to a landing dock where Max Rio kept a small boat with an outboard motor so he could fish during season. He had once been married to a Shoshone woman from the Agaidika tribe, the salmon-eaters, and during her tenure had developed a taste for high mountain stream salmon and lake trout—a taste that endured long after the woman herself.

Earl parked the truck next to a Jeep with Montana plates and walked onto the cabin porch. The lights were on and country-western music was coming from a radio somewhere inside. Quietly opening the front door, Earl stepped inside and swept the room with a single quick glance. Two men were playing cards at a table, open cans of beer in front of them. A young woman with curly reddish hair, in tight jeans, was sitting next to the radio, chewing gum, flipping through a magazine. Earl stood there until the cool evening air reached the men at the table and they noticed him.

"What the—? Who the hell are you?" one of them demanded, pausing as he was about to deal the cards. He was a fleshy-faced young man with lips that were shaped in a permanent sneer.

"My name's Buck," Earl said. "Max sent me out."

"Max sent you out?" the other man said incredulously. This one was raw looking, very pale, with the kind of skin that got nicked every time he shaved.

"Yeah, Max sent me out," Earl said again, "about the payroll." Closing the door, he moved toward the table. The girl turned down the radio and stared curiously at him.

"Max didn't say nothing about us working with no breed," said the first man. He put down the cards and drew his hands part way toward himself on the table. Earl's eyes flicked to the man's unbuttoned bulky-knit cardigan. A warning shot to the surface of his mind: *He's carrying.*

"You're not going to be working *with* me, man," Earl replied evenly, moving a step closer to the table. "You're going to be working *for* me."

The man's natural sneer became a cold smile. "You don't say?"

As the man's right hand disappeared under his sweater front, Earl pulled the hunting knife from his belt and in a split instant had its blade against the other man's Adam's apple. "You pull on me and I'll cut your buddy's throat," he said evenly.

The first man's hand remained under his sweater; his eyes fixed unblinkingly on Earl.

"Get it back on the table," Earl ordered.

The man did not move. Earl flexed his arm a fraction and the knife blade transmitted the movement of his muscles.

"Goddamn it, Duke, put your hand back on the table!" said the raw-faced one who bled easily. "Come on, man—!"

Earl saw Duke's eyes move momentarily to the tattoo of the war club on the hand holding the knife; then he drew his own hand back out, empty, and put it in front of him again. Earl removed the blade from the other one's throat but kept the hunting knife in his hand.

"If you guys don't want to work for me because I'm part Indian," he told them flatly, "get your things together and move on. I'll find a couple of Shoshones to take your place."

"Wait a minute, let's not get excited," said the raw-faced man. Rubbing his neck, he turned slightly in his chair to see Earl better. "You just surprised us, that's all. We weren't expecting no breed. But if Max says you're the boss, then you're the boss." He held out his hand. "I'm Gary Veeber. He's Duke Malone. No hard feelings, okay?"

Shifting the knife to his left hand, Earl briefly shook hands with Gary Veeber and exchanged curt nods with Duke Malone.

"Who's the girl?" Earl asked.

"She's with me," Duke said. "Any objections?"

"She know what you're doing here?"

"She knows everything."

Great, Earl thought. He wondered how many other people knew about the plan. "Where'd she come from?" Earl asked.

"Hey, mister," the young woman suddenly interjected, "I understand English. And I'm not no mute."

"You shut up, Marie," Duke ordered.

"Why should I?" she snapped. Tossing aside the magazine, she strode over to the table. "I don't like being talked about like I ain't in the room!"

Gary rose, smiling with chapped lips. "She's okay, Buck," he assured him. "Duke picked her up in a cafe over in Casper when we was on our way here, after Max sent for us."

"Waitin' tables?" Earl asked the girl.

"Yeah, waitin' tables," she verified. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Not if the tips are good," Earl said. His eyes flicked from Gary to Duke and back again, studying, weighing. He didn't like the idea of the girl being there. And Duke was obviously a hothead. Veeber might be all right—if he didn't start fighting with Duke over the girl. A lot was going to depend on how long it was until the job; Earl

wasn't sure if the Air Force paid on the first of the month or some other day. If it was the first, that was only a week away. Maybe he could hold things together until then.

"I'm meeting the inside man tomorrow," Earl told them. "When I get the final plan, I'll come back out and we'll go over it. In the meantime, stay out of town—all of you. If you need anything, call Max and he'll have it sent out."

"Why the hell can't we go into town?" Duke challenged. "It's full of airmen from the base. Who'd notice us?"

"Everybody would. You two don't look like airmen any more than I do. We all look like jailbirds. The only reason I won't stand out is because I'm a breed."

"What about me?" Marie asked bluntly. "What do I look like?"

Earl ignored the question. "Stay out of town, all of you," he ordered again.

Turning, he walked out of the cabin and got into Max's pickup. As he drove away, he wondered: What *did* she look like?

He had been away from women so long, he could not put her into a category.

The military-police major was a ramrod-straight man with a neatly trimmed moustache and a bristle of grey hair. The creases in his uniform looked like they could have sliced bread. His name was Cummings.

"The payroll is flown in at ten o'clock in the morning," he outlined for Earl. They were in Earl's room at the Happy Teepee. Max was with them. "When the payroll plane lands, the cash boxes are unloaded and put into a military-police van, then transported over to the base paymaster's office. They're put into a vault, but the vault is left open during the day because it contains base exchange receipts, personnel savings records, things like that. The payroll money stays there, under guard, until after noon chow. Payout begins at one o'clock, but the off-duty enlisted men start lining up about twelve-thirty. If three men with guns walk in there precisely at noon, they should be able to transfer the money to the trunk of a car behind the paymaster's office and be off the base by twelve-twenty."

Earl studied two neatly hand-drawn layouts Cummings had brought, one of the base itself, the other of the paymaster's office. "How many guards are there?" Earl asked.

"Three. Two enlisted MPs and myself."

"Armed how?"

"I carry a sidearm, a .45 automatic; the two enlisted men have carbines."

"Will they put up a fight?"

"Absolutely not. If they look like they're going to, I'll order them to put down their weapons."

"Won't there be some kind of investigation if you do that?" Earl asked.

"Probably," Cummings guessed. He shrugged it off. "I'm sure I'll get a reprimand put in my file and be passed over for promotion to colonel—again. It doesn't matter. I have my twenty years in; as soon as it's over, I intend to resign my commission anyway." His expression tightened. "I'm tired of having to salute men ten and fifteen years younger than me."

Earl nodded. That explained *that*, he thought, putting to rest his curiosity about why a career Air Force officer would engineer a deal like this one. Earl had asked Max about it before Cummings arrived for the meeting. Max had merely shrugged and said, "For the quarter-million, I reckon." But Earl had shaken his head. It had to be something other than money. Something more important. Like pride.

"How do we get onto the base?" Earl asked, now that the question of the major's motivation was solved.

"I'll have legitimate ID passes made for all of you, plus a base parking sticker for the car you'll be driving. What about the car, Max?" he asked the club owner, who was stretched out on the bed.

"It'll be bought at a used car lot up in Cody the day before the job and driven down here by one of my boys," Max said. "He'll call with the make and model as soon as he buys it and I'll pass the information on to you."

"Good," said Cummings. "Now then, what happens to this car after the job?"

"Let me worry about that," Max said. "The only thing you need to know about after the job is where to pick up your cut."

"I'm concerned about the base parking sticker that will be on the car," Cummings said, stiffening. "And I rather resent that answer. Don't you trust me?"

"Trust has got nothing to do with it, Major," Earl answered for Max. "The less you know about me, the others, the car, everything, the better off you are."

"Yes, but it *is* my plan," Cummings insisted. "I've got a right to know all the details."

"It's for your own protection," Earl placated him. "Suppose they order you to take a lie detector test after it's over? The less you have to lie about, the better. Right?"

"I suppose so," Cummings reluctantly agreed, after throwing Max an irritated look. Max smiled.

"We just want to keep you clean, Major, so you can enjoy your quarter mil. And we'll make sure that sticker is scraped off the windshield."

Earl and Max exchanged glances that said: Best let this joker stay in the dark as much as possible. The less he knows, the less he can tell.

"I'd like you to go over just how we should act when we stop at the gate going in," Earl said, moving on to an area where the major could again be in charge.

"Right," said Cummings. "Good idea." He reached for his wallet. "Let me show you what your ID cards will look like—"

That afternoon, as Earl was leaving the motel, he saw the girl, Marie, coming out of a convenience store across the street. Muttering a curse, he strode across to the parking lot and came up behind her as she reached the Jeep with the Montana plates. He took her by the arm as she was loading grocery bags.

"Didn't I tell you to stay out of town?" he asked coldly.

"Let go of my arm," Marie said evenly.

"Answer me."

"Let—go—of—my—arm." Her words were now a warning. Earl glanced around. They were too much out in the open for him to risk a scene. He let go of her arm. "Duke ran out of cigarettes this morning," she said, glaring. "He was going to come in himself but I talked him out of it. I figured it was better for me to come in than him."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Because I'm smarter than he is," Marie said matter-of-factly. "Smarter than Gary too, as far as that goes." Her voice lost its edge. "Look, it was either me or one of them. And if one of them had come in, the other probably would've too. Then they'd both have ended up in some joint drinking." She opened one of the bags and showed him two bottles of Jack Daniels. "I figured it'd be better if they drank in the cabin."

Earl looked a long way into her eyes. Odd, light green eyes they were. A little too close together, giving her a cagey look. Her nose

was long too, and her chin was pointed, and she had soft, downy hair discernible on both cheeks just in front of her ears. She had on tight jeans like she'd had on the previous night.

Earl finished unloading the grocery cart for her, pushed it away, and locked the Jeep's door. "Let's take a walk," he said.

Between town and the mountains was the Beaver River, and they walked along its elevated bank for a quarter mile or so. It was a pretty day; clear, warm, the air sweet. The two young people might have been talking about romance instead of a felony.

"What do you expect to get out of this deal?" Earl asked frankly.

"Duke said he'd stake me to five thousand dollars to buy into a coffee shop with my sister Ida."

"Where at?"

"Cedar City, Utah. There's a lot of ski trade there in the winter-time. An old couple owns the place now but they want to retire. Ida raised five thousand and she's working the rest off over five years. Then she'll have half interest. I can get the other half the same way."

"How'd Ida get her five thousand?"

Marie avoided his eyes. "I don't know. She was working down in Vegas, doing something."

Earl nodded. Everybody had a dream, he decided. He wanted a little place of his own somewhere, a few acres and an old house. Marie wanted half of a coffee shop. Max wanted to be frozen and brought back to life.

"You think you can trust Duke?" he asked, not unkindly.

"Much as I can trust anybody, I guess," Marie replied. "What's the worst that can happen? He'll dump me and I'll go back to waitin' tables. I'll still get my five thousand; it'll just take me longer."

Guts, Earl thought. And she was right: she *was* smarter than those two punks out at the cabin. He stared off at the Wind River range for a moment thinking of Togwotee; just briefly a slight frown clouded his face.

"I'll make a deal with you," he said presently. "You help me keep an eye on those two hotshots out at the cabin, help me keep them in line, and I'll give you five thousand out of my cut. If Duke comes through, you'll have ten; if he doesn't, you'll still have your stake."

Marie stopped and stared at him. "Why should you do that? You won't have no trouble keeping those two in line. Gary's already shaking since you threatened to cut his throat." She tilted her head an inch. "Would you really have done it?"

"Yes. I'd still like to make a deal with you. Just in case Duke gets any bright ideas. It wouldn't take much for him to get Gary to go along with something stupid."

"Like a double-cross?"

"Yeah."

Marie shook her head. "They're not that smart, Earl." It was the first time she had used his name. He liked the sound of it on her voice.

"I'm not worried about how smart they are," he said. "I'm worried about how dumb they are."

They resumed walking in silence. As Marie thought over the proposition, Earl gazed up at the peaks again. Presently, Marie made up her mind.

"Okay, it's a deal." Following his gaze toward the mountains, she squinted. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. There's an old man up there somewhere, but nobody's seen him in years. I was just wondering if he was still alive." He took her arm, gently this time, and this time she did not resist his touch. "Come on, let's start back."

On the way to where the Jeep was parked, Earl told her about Togwotee, the last of the Mountain Shoshones, the last of the sheep-eaters, who was thought still to roam the high peaks, maintaining himself almost entirely on an occasional Big Horn sheep kill.

"Do you believe he's still alive?" Marie asked.

"Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't," Earl admitted. "When I was a kid, I believed it all the time. As I got older, I started to have doubts. But just about the time I got to the point where I *didn't* believe it, some hikers or deer hunters or forest rangers would find a new Big Horn trap that hadn't been there a year earlier. Then I'd start believing all over again."

"Couldn't somebody else have set the trap?" Marie asked. Earl shook his head.

"It's not the kind of trap you set; it's the kind you build. It's a Shoshone trap, designed especially for the Big Horn. The tribe started using it centuries ago. You take logs, see, fallen branches, that kind of stuff, and pile them along both sides of a Big Horn migration trail. You pile the stuff closer and closer as the trail goes up, until it's very narrow at the top. Pretty soon the sheep are in single file instead of all spread out. Then one of the tribe frightens them and makes them run into a higher pile of those same logs and

branches. As they struggle to get over the pile, they're clubbed in the head."

"God," Marie said with a shudder, "that's cold."

"It's no worse than the way whites slaughter cows and hogs for beef and pork," Earl rationalized.

"I guess you're right," Marie allowed. She herself was staring up at the range now. "Could one old man do that?" she wondered aloud.

"It wouldn't be easy, the older he got," Earl speculated. "He'd have to be at the wall to do the clubbing, so he'd have to rig a dummy or something to scare them, or maybe train a wolf to do it. But he'd only need maybe two good-sized rams to last him all year; that'd give him about five hundred pounds of meat."

"Is that all he eats—sheep?"

"Not all, just mostly. He probably snares a rabbit now and then, maybe even a very young deer. And he has berries, nuts, wild greens—stuff like that. It's a pretty good diet, really."

"I'll stick to cheeseburgers, thank you very much," Marie quipped. They had reached the parking lot. "Speaking of which, I could use one right now. You hungry?"

"Yeah, I was on my way out to get something when I saw you." He bobbed his chin across the street. "There's a McDonald's next to my motel over there."

"Is that where you're staying, that motel?"

"Yeah."

Marie stepped closer to him. "Why don't we get some stuff to go? Take it to your room?"

Earl glanced down at the triangle of white flesh that disappeared beneath her blouse. She could not have gotten a job at the Grand Tetons Club, that was sure. And Duke wouldn't like this idea at all. But right then Earl didn't really give a damn about either.

"Let's do that," he said.

After their first time together, Marie came to town every day. If it wasn't for food, liquor, cigarettes, it was some trivial purchase: magazines, chewing gum, doughnuts. After a very quick stop at the convenience store, she went directly to Earl's room. Back at the cabin, Duke and Gary thought they were really putting one over on Earl.

In Earl's room, he and Marie always began with lustful, almost desperate lovemaking—he because it was new to him again after so long, she because she recognized that his need for her was so fervid

and ravenous; he seemed to have to have everything she could give him—quickly, anxiously, as if it might be snatched away from him. But their second time, an hour later, was different; their second time was hers: a slow, supple ministering of one to the other, a delicate sculpting of inner rapture, with her body blossoming within itself time after glorious time until eventually she sensed that his passion absolutely had to crest, and then she used everything she had learned since she was first abused at the age of eleven to take his body momentarily away from earthly sensations and make it celestial. Twice every afternoon they reached the heavens together.

Earl wished it could have gone on forever, into the hours of the night, but he worried that Duke might become suspicious. When Marie was in the cabin with Duke, she was at his mercy. Earl did not ask if she did the same things with Duke at night that she did with him during the day; he did not want to know. People had to do whatever was necessary to get from dusk to dawn, through the darkness. He just didn't want Marie to get hurt because of him. If she did, if Duke harmed her in some way, Earl would show him a few things with a knife that Duke never even dreamed of—like slicing under his fingernails and taking them off intact, or cutting his Achilles tendons so that his feet did nothing but flop.

"I can get you a gun," he offered one afternoon. "A small one, a Derringer. Just in case."

Marie, standing in front of the dresser combing her hair, paused to shake her head. "If he found it, he'd know for sure something was up. If he gets suspicious now, I'll just make a joke out of it and embarrass him in front of Gary until he shuts up. Anyway, Gary kind of likes me too; I don't think he'll let Duke get rough."

It didn't surprise Earl that Gary liked her too. A lot of guys had probably liked her over the years. She hadn't fallen with the last rain, that was sure. Earl warned himself about becoming emotionally involved with her, because his plans were already made. Right after the split from the job, he was going to be long gone, up to the Powder River country in Montana, buy himself a little place, get a good saddle horse, an old dog that needed a home, maybe even look around for a Northern Cheyenne woman to live with him, if he could find one that was a good cook and didn't drink too much. As far as Marie was concerned, he'd give her the five thousand, like he promised; then she was history.

In the meantime, he felt oddly responsible for her. If Duke got nasty with her while Earl was still around, Duke was a cripple. Period.

The night before the job, all of them except Major Cummings got together out at the cabin. Max had brought their military ID cards and the weapons they would use.

"These," he said to Duke and Gary, "are automatic carbines with banana clips: extra firepower in case something goes wrong and you have to shoot your way out." He put the two weapons on the table. "You both know how to handle pieces like these?"

"I'm not sure I do," Gary said tentatively.

"I know all about 'em," Duke flaunted, snatching one up and examining it with what he imagined was professional appraisal but was more like bluster.

"You teach Gary then," Max said. He turned his rheumy eyes to Earl and handed him a .38 revolver with a five-inch barrel. "This was your daddy's," he said quietly. "I took it off him the night them revenue agents tried to run us down and we got in that wreck."

Earl rubbed his fingertips lightly over the faded blue steel of the cylinder and barrel and the smooth, worn wood of the grips. For a strange, swift moment, he almost felt as if his father was there in the room with them. A spirit experience, he thought; a flashback, like the guys in the joint who'd been in Vietnam sometimes had. The screws thought they were faking and threw them in the hole. But Earl knew they weren't faking; Earl could see in their eyes that what they were feeling was real. *Very* real. The same as what he just felt was real.

Coming out of the fleeting daydream, he saw Marie staring at him, and Duke staring at her. "Thanks, Max," Earl said to the older man, putting the pistol under his belt, well away from his knife.

"All right," said Max, unfolding the major's diagrams, "let's go over this one more time. Bucky, pour me a drink, will you?"

Earl went over to the bar. While he was measuring Max's usual three ounces, Duke sauntered over.

"You haven't happened to run into Marie in town the last few days, have you, man?" he asked. The natural sneer of his lips made the question seem almost obscene.

"In town? I told you three to stay out of town," Earl replied, not falling for what Duke probably thought was a clever trap. If Earl had simply said no, he hadn't seen her, without acting surprised, it would have been a sure tip-off to Duke.

"Never mind what you told us," Duke said. "Marie's been going in every day and it's too late for you to do anything about it now. What I want to know is if she's been seeing you."

"What makes you ask?" Earl countered.

"She's been staying longer and longer every trip. She says she just browses in the stores and goes window shopping, but at night she's always got an excuse for not putting out. She's got a headache, or she's getting cramps, that kind of stuff." Duke's eyes narrowed. "I think she's playing around."

"On a stud like you?" Earl said. He feigned a skeptical expression. "A girl would have to be crazy to cheat on a catch like you, man." Without waiting for a reaction, Earl took Max's drink over to him, leaving a frowning Duke to puzzle over whether Earl had burned him or not.

Max went over the plan with them one last time, emphasizing the importance of adhering very closely to the schedule drawn up by the major. "Two or three minutes off one way or the other shouldn't make no difference," he told them, "but any more than that could be a problem—so stick to this timetable the best you can. Remember, Bucky here is running the show. Keep your eyes and your minds on the MPs and not the money. Bucky will handle the money: he empties all the cash boxes into a big duffel bag. When he's got it all, you guys herd the major and the two MPs into the vault and lock them in. Then you toss the duffel bag into the trunk of the car and drive back off the base."

Max paused to take a swallow of gin. His eyes flicked from one man to the other. "After the job, come straight back here to the cabin. Cesar, the kid who met you at the bus, Bucky, will be waiting; he'll take the getaway car and ditch it. Duke and Gary will stay here at the cabin and go on pretending to be fishermen, like they been doing. Bucky, you take my pickup that Cesar will have and bring the duffel bag to me at the club and I'll stash it. Then you go back to your motel and lay low." His eyes flicked again, nervously. "In a week or so, when things cool down, I'll get in touch with everybody individually and have you come in for your cut."

"That's kind of loose, ain't it?" Gary Veeber asked. His rawboned face looked unusually pale, as if he'd bled recently. He exchanged suspicious glances with Duke. "I ain't crazy about one guy handling the whole take."

Max's jaw clenched. He stared angrily at Gary. "All right, you keep it then. You and Duke there. Leave three-quarters of a million in cash lying around the cabin here. Or drag it out in the boat with you when you go fishing. Sling it over your shoulder like a goddamn bag of laundry and walk around town with it."

"I was only saying—" Gary began.

"I know what you were saying!" Max barked. "You were saying I can't be trusted!" He pointed a trembling finger at Veeber. "Let me tell you something, kid! I was in on capers before you were born! I stuck up a registered-mail truck in North Carolina once with Basil Banghart—The Owl himself. Before that, I charged a bank in Minnesota with Doc Barker. Christ, I even knew Johnny Dillinger! You think I'd—I'd—" Spittle formed at the corners of his lips as he searched for words. Earl put an arm around his shoulders.

"Take it easy, Max," he soothed. "Veeber didn't mean nothing personal; he's just nervous. Right, Veeber?"

"Sure, right." Gary seized on the excuse. "I just, you know, want everything to go all right, is all." He forced a sick smile. "Hell, no, I didn't mean nothing personal, Mr. Rio."

Earl exchanged a tense glance with Marie. He was glad the job was tomorrow; this bunch was getting too edgy for his taste. It wasn't smart to have hot disagreements when there were automatic weapons in the room.

Max calmed down and he and Earl got ready to leave. Then Max paused to reiterate one last point to Duke and Gary, and it gave Marie a moment to speak to Earl. "He's suspicious of us," she said nervously. "He's been on my case all day."

"Don't worry about it," Earl advised. "He's going to have the job on his mind now, and after tomorrow all he'll be thinking about is spending the money. As soon as you can get into town, I'll have Max give you the five Duke promised you and the five I promised you, and you can split."

"Yeah, sure," Marie said, swallowing, then biting her lip. "Where, uh—what are you going to do, Earl?"

"I haven't decided yet," he lied. He immediately found it distasteful, lying to her. He wondered what it would be like, having someone like her around all the time. "Look, you're pretty set on that coffee shop with your sister, right?"

Marie shrugged. "Not *that* set." She glanced uneasily at Duke across the room. The lip she'd bitten began to tremble. "Earl, I don't know if you feel the same way about me as I do about you, but—"

"I probably do," he admitted abruptly, realizing it himself at that very moment. Marie's lip stopped trembling as her mouth dropped open.

"Really?" A slow little smile started.

"Yeah, really." He saw that Max had finished with Duke and Gary, and the three of them were walking toward the door. Duke looked at them distrustfully.

"What's this big conference all about?" he demanded.

"Just warning her not to leave the cabin tomorrow while the job's going down," Earl said.

"Where she's concerned," Duke asserted, projecting his chin an extra inch, "I'll do the warning."

"Whatever you say," Earl acceded coldly. His black eyes drilled into Duke. Maybe he'd cut the son of a bitch's Achilles tendons anyway. Just to see him crawl.

"Okay," Max said at the door, "Bucky'll be here in the getaway car at ten-thirty in the morning. You guys be ready. Get familiar with them guns. Let's do this one right, boys."

He shook hands with both of them, then he and Earl left.

They parked on the side of the highway in the getaway car, the three of them, all wearing gloves, drinking Dr. Peppers and swallowing caffeine tablets with it. Their adrenalin was surging and they wished that the core of the job was now, that they were in the paymaster's office right then—but they were twelve minutes ahead of schedule, so they had to sit and wait. It gave them a chance to finish the energy-laced soft drinks and tablets they had started on when they were halfway to the base to ingest more bounce, to become more hyped, more infused with the danger and exhilaration of what they were about to do. Gary Veeber was behind the wheel, Earl next to him, Duke in the back seat. Their ski masks were in the glove box, guns and duffel bag in the trunk. Earl's eyes constantly flicked to the wristwatch Max had given him. Presently, after what seemed like a very long time, he said, "Let's go."

It was two more miles to the missile base main gate. Approaching, Gary drove to the far right lane, marked Enlisted Personnel, and pulled in behind two other cars. A sharply attired black MP wearing white accessories—lanyard, web belt, gloves—mechanically and perfunctorily checked vehicle stickers and ID cards before waving the cars through. He barely glanced at Earl and his two companions, only at their cards and the base permit sticker on the windshield. When Gary drove in, Duke slapped a fist into his palm and said elatedly, "All right! This is gonna be a piece of cake, man!"

"Save it for when we drive out," Earl told him soberly. Duke winked at Gary in the rearview mirror and gave Earl the finger.

It was two minutes before noon when they drove past the building that held the paymaster's office. Parked in front of it, as the major said it would be, was the MP van that had brought the payroll from the airstrip. Gary glanced at Earl, who bobbed his chin toward the end of the building. "Right on around," Earl said.

Gary drove slowly around the building. Behind it were parked several Air Force vehicles and a couple of civilian autos. "Pull in next to that red Dodge," Earl instructed him, selecting the vacant parking space nearest the building's rear door. Gary guided the car into the space and cut the engine. Looking at the wristwatch again, Earl saw that they were within a minute of being precisely on time. He got the ski masks from the glove box and handed them out. Then, drawing in a deep breath and letting it out, he said, "Okay," and opened the car door.

They converged at the trunk, which Gary opened. Each carbine-and-banana-clip combination was wrapped in brown paper with an oversized rubber band holding the package closed. Earl handed one each to Gary and Duke, stuck the pistol in his belt, and grabbed the duffel bag. He lowered the trunk lid but did not engage its lock. Turning, he went briskly up several steps to the rear porch of the building and led Gary and Duke inside.

In the downstairs corridor, completely deserted because it was the noon hour, they paused long enough to pull on the ski masks and quickly unwrap the carbines. Gary fumbled with his banana clip and Duke had to hurriedly attach his and then help his partner. When they were ready, they moved swiftly along the corridor to a set of double doors about halfway to the front of the building, lettered Base Paymaster. Without a word, Earl pushed through one of the doors, drawing his pistol. Inside the office, Major Cummings and two MP guards turned to him in surprise. They were standing around a desk with styrofoam cups of coffee in their hands.

"Freeze or I'll blast you!" Earl warned coldly. Gary and Duke moved in to flank him with their carbines leveled. "You two," Earl ordered the enlisted men, "set down those cups and unsling your weapons. Lay them on the floor." When that was done: "Now, you"—to the major—"put down your cup and all three of you lace your fingers behind your necks." And to Duke: "If they move, kill 'em." Earl's head jerked at Gary: "Get those carbines, then watch the door."

In a few long strides, Earl was across the office and into the vault. Unfolding the duffel bag lengthwise on a counting table, he flipped

open the lid of the first cash box and began stuffing bundles of ten-dollar bills into it.

Gary Veeber slung both military weapons on his shoulder and stood tensely at the corridor door, listening intently. He was back-to-back with Duke, who stood with feet planted apart, his carbine covering the officer and the two MP guards. Neither Gary nor Duke heard the MP sergeant whisper to the officer.

"Major, those guys can't fire at us."

Cummings frowned. "What?" he whispered back.

"The clips on those carbines aren't snapped all the way on. They won't feed the ammo."

The major's mouth dropped open slightly. The other MP whispered also, from the side of his mouth. "He's right, Major. Look at those clips: they're attached but not snapped in. You can pull your pistol and waste these guys, sir—"

A frown deepened on the major's face. He wet his lips. "Are you sure?"

"Positive sir—look at them," the first MP said. "Drop these two jokers, Major—then we'll grab our pieces and get the other one when he comes out of the vault."

In the vault, Earl was emptying the next cash box, this one bundles of fives, stuffing them as fast as he could into the expanding duffel bag.

"How about it, Major?" the MP whispered. The major's eyes lighted up, almost as if he could visualize himself a hero, receiving a decoration, being promoted to colonel. Swallowing nervously, he reached for the scabbard on his hip.

"Keep your goddamned hands up!" Duke warned. The major's hand kept moving. "Hey, man, what the hell are you doing?" Confusion laced his voice; this wasn't supposed to happen.

Gary Veeber whirled from the door and saw the major's hand unflapping his scabbard and drawing the automatic. "Get your hand away from that gun!" he shouted. The officer's hand did not stop. Veeber aimed his carbine and stroked its trigger. It clicked harmlessly. He glared at Duke. "What the hell! You said you knew all about these guns!" he yelled accusingly. The major's hand was drawing the automatic out. "Shoot him!" Veeber cried as his panic rose. But the major got the .45 out, jacked the first round into it, and shot Veeber once in the chest, slamming his body back against the double door. Duke aimed his carbine, jerked the trigger, and heard the

same awful *click!* Then Cummings shot him too, and he spun along the wall like a man in an epileptic seizure.

From the door of the vault, as the major was turning toward it, Earl held his pistol at armslength and put a single bullet between the major's eyes. Then he fell into a crouch and covered the two MPs.

"Get in the goddamned vault!" he ordered, stepping aside. They quickly obeyed. Earl herded them to the rear, dragged the partially filled duffel bag out, and closed the vault door. Breathing heavily, he snatched off the ski mask and looked at the carnage around him. *Christ almighty!* he thought. Gary Veeber, Duke, and the major were lying very still in slowly spreading pools of their own blood. Earl felt bile rise in his throat. With a sleeve, he wiped sudden sweat from his face.

Gulping in a great chestful of air, he released it in an audible burst and hefted the duffel bag over one shoulder. Putting the pistol in his belt just under his jacket, he opened the office door enough to peer up and down the corridor. Incredibly, it was still deserted. Without further hesitation, Earl stepped from the office and strode quickly back to the rear door.

In less than five minutes, he had the duffel bag in the trunk, lid closed, and was driving off the base again after showing his pass at the enlisted men's exit.

Well, you done it now, boy. Earl shook his head ruefully as he sped along the highway toward town. Killed an Air Force officer on a federal military base during an armed robbery. The United States government had a hangman's noose with thirteen loops in it for people who pulled that kind of stunt. You stepped in something soft this time, boy—

But wait a minute, he told himself, chewing off a piece of fingernail. What the hell was he getting jumpy about? The two MPs never saw his face. The only three who knew who he was were dead. Maybe this was the best thing that could have happened. Now there was just him and Max left. Max was going to be disappointed because they didn't get the whole payroll; Earl doubted if he got a tenth of it. And, the realization slammed home again, he'd had to kill a man to get that—

He had killed the major in cold blood, he thought, feeling sick about it. Not that it was his first killing—there had been that biker freak in the joint—but this was his first time with a gun, the first time it had been so loud and bloody; the major's face had exploded

like a bottle of red ink. What the hell had happened? he wondered. Why had Cummings turned on them and killed Duke and Gary? And why in hell hadn't one of them killed *him* first? They'd had the drop on him; it didn't make any sense—

Earl's eyes flicked to the speedometer: he was clipping eighty. Okay, he thought. Okay. Settle down. Get it together. Start thinking ahead, not behind; that was done. Easing up on the accelerator, he slowed to the speed limit. With his sleeve, he again wiped perspiration from his face. The best thing to do was keep to the schedule, just like it was planned. Go back to the cabin, let Cesar take the getaway car and ditch it, use the pickup Cesar had brought and take the money, what there was of it, to Max. Then Max could decide what to do. Max would be fair and take care of him; Earl had no doubt of that. The only change I'll make in my own plans, Earl decided, is to take Marie with me. Max will probably split the money evenly with me, then Marie and I can cut out together. He didn't know where to, but it wouldn't matter at first; just a bus to somewhere. They could plan on the run. That's what they'd both been doing most of their lives anyway.

All the way back to the cabin, Earl kept his mind off the bloodshed behind him by forcing himself to concentrate on the future. But as he finally approached the cabin, he found something new to worry about: the pickup Cesar was supposed to have there was nowhere in sight. A new fear surfaced and Earl's head began to throb. What the hell was wrong now?

As soon as he pulled up in front of the cabin, Marie ran out to meet him. "Where's Duke and Gary?" she asked at once, uneasily.

"Never mind them," Earl said without getting out. "Where the hell's Cesar?"

"He never showed up. Did Duke and—"

"Get in," Earl ordered. "Come on, Marie, move!"

As soon as Marie had the passenger door closed, Earl spun a cloud of dust behind them and sped back toward the highway, muttering curses as he drove. Marie stared at him, unable to get Duke and Gary out of her mind. "They're dead, aren't they?" she finally blurted out.

"Did you kill them?" she asked accusingly.

"Me!" He took his eyes off the road to look indignantly at her. "Hell, no. Why the hell would I kill them?"

"I don't know." She shook her head and looked down at the floorboard. "For a minute I just thought—I don't know." She blinked several times. "Poor Duke—"

Poor Duke? Earl's expression became incredulous. "Yesterday," he reminded her, "You hated the son of a bitch."

"That doesn't mean I wanted him dead!" she snapped. Her tone became disgusted. "Men! You don't understand a goddamned thing!"

They drove in silence for several minutes, Earl's knuckles white on the steering wheel, Marie's jaw clenched but her eyes moist. After a few miles, Earl sighed and said wearily, "Look, the job was a bust. Don't ask me what happened; I don't know. All's I know is that all of a sudden this major, this inside man who was supposed to be in on it with us, shot Duke and Gary. Then I shot him. I grabbed what money I could and got the hell out. I didn't get much—"

"You're safe," she said practically, putting a hand on his arm, "that's all that matters." Suddenly she was his girl again. "Can we get away?"

"I think so." They were just entering town now. "I'll see Max and tell him what happened; he'll figure out what to do." Earl pulled up in front of the Happy Teepee Motel and handed Marie his room key. "Wait for me here. I'll be back in a little while."

Gripping his arm with both hands, Marie bit her lower lip briefly. "You're not going to ditch me, are you, Earl?"

"No," he said simply. He placed one palm gently on her cheek for a moment; they both felt love in the touch. "Wait for me," he said.

Earl parked in back of the Grand Tetons Club and went in through the kitchen again. Algernon, the black cook, was not on duty that early, but a burly Indian day cook, who knew Earl only slightly, glanced at him self-consciously as he walked through with the duffel bag under his arm. Then one of the topless waitresses, a white girl Earl had gone to high school with, passed him and averted her eyes without speaking. Earl felt a tightness form in his chest; something was wrong here too. His hand moved to reassure himself that the pistol was still convenient under his jacket.

At the door to Max's office, Earl knocked briefly and entered. He found Cesar in Max's chair, his face buried in folded arms on the desk. As Earl closed the door, Cesar looked up. He was crying, his expression a shroud of anguish.

"What's the matter?" Earl asked. "Where's Max?"

"He's d—dead, Earl," the young Shoshone stammered. "He d—died this morning. I was r—right here w—with him. He was p—pouring a drink and all—all of a sudden he d—dropped the b—bottle and grabbed his head with b—both hands and fell down.

The d—doctor don't know yet what c—caused it—”

Putting down the duffel bag, Earl walked behind the desk and stood in back of the chair. He put his hands on the young man's shoulders. “Max had a brain tumor, kid. He told me about it. He knew he could go anytime. Don't feel bad. He was ready.”

Almost ready, anyway, Earl thought, remembering the place that Max had told him about that suspended bodies for the future. Not that it would have made any difference now; the take from the robbery wasn't nearly enough for Max to have done it.

Earl went back around to the duffel bag and emptied it on the desk. Quickly he separated the bundles of bills into denominations and counted them. Mostly fives and tens, with a few bundles of twenties he had just got to when the shooting started; there was ninety thousand dollars. Earl pulled out fifteen thousand and gave it to Cesar.

“Get the hell out of this town, kid,” he said. “Max told me that as soon as the base closes, this place won't be nothing but a wide spot in the road. Go down to Casper or somewheres and go to a trade school or something. Then get yourself an honest job, find a good woman, have some kids, buy a house. Be ordinary, kid. It's the only goddamned way to live, believe me.”

Putting the rest of the money back in the duffel bag, Earl left the office.

As soon as he walked into the motel room, Marie, sitting in front of the television, looked up at him fearfully. “They know who you are,” she said, her voice breaking.

“What?”

“It's on the news. Duke didn't die right away. He lived long enough to give them your name. The announcer said they'd have a picture of you in a little while, as soon as they got one from the FBI—”

Earl exerted rigid control and forced himself to appear calm. “We've still got plenty of time,” he lied. He tossed the duffel bag onto the bed. “Take that and get the first bus out of town. Get down to the place where your sister's at—where is it?”

“Cedar City. In Utah.”

“Yeah. Buy into that coffee shop with her. I'll meet you there—” Marie began to cry. “When will you meet me?”

“As soon as I can. I'll have to lay low for a while, but after that—” She shook her head. “You're lying—you won't come—”

Earl took her in his arms and held her trembling body pressed to his. "I'm not lying, I *will* meet you." Gently he stroked her hair. "But first I've got to hide out until the heat from this job dies down. I'll go onto the reservation; they won't find me there." He held her at armslength. "You've got to do as I say, understand? There's no other way."

"I want to go with you—" she pleaded, weeping like a child now. "Please don't leave me—"

Earl shook her. "You can't go with me, goddamn it! I'll be on the run! I killed an Air Force officer, Marie! That FBI picture they were talking about will be on every front page and TV channel in the country. The only chance I've got is to go it alone. You don't want to slow me down, do you—make me get caught?"

"N—n—no—"

Earl lifted her chin with a knuckle. "Then do what I tell you." With his fingertips he wiped her tears away. And he marshaled every nerve in his body to produce a smile. "You get set up in that coffee shop," he said in a softer, gentler voice. "One of these days you'll turn around and find me sitting at the counter."

"Oh, Earl—"

They embraced, kissed, embraced again, then Marie found herself being pushed gently onto the side of the bed and saw Earl, still smiling, backing toward the door, opening it, throwing her a last reassuring wink as he backed out and pulled the door closed behind him.

Then he was gone.

Outside the door, Earl's smile vanished and his whole face, eyes included, seemed to turn cold and hard, as if he were already dead and rigor mortis had claimed him.

I ain't got a chance in the world, he thought. Not one.

But just in case, he decided to check. Getting into the car, he laid his revolver, his father's revolver before him, on the passenger seat and pulled out of the motel lot. He drove to the nearest end of town, where Route 28 hooked south. There was a roadblock in place just at the city limit: two highway patrol cruisers and a town marshal's car.

Turning a corner, Earl went around the block, hung a left, and drove to the other end of the town strip, where Route 789 headed north. As he expected, there was a roadblock there also: a county sheriff's car and two military police vehicles.

That's all she wrote, boy, he thought. Only one place to go now.

Back in the center of town, Earl turned off the main drag and drove through several blocks of a residential district until he came to the beginning of a narrow gravel road that wound immediately, almost precipitously, up into the mountains, the high mountains, the Wind River range. A road sign where the pavement stopped read: Dead End. You got that right, Earl thought wryly.

Shifting into low gear, he started slowly up the road. Far ahead and above him, he could see the timberline, where he knew the road stopped; beyond that was the upper reaches, the cold and the snow, to which he would have to climb by foot.

Earl thought of Togwotee. He hoped to god the old man was still alive.



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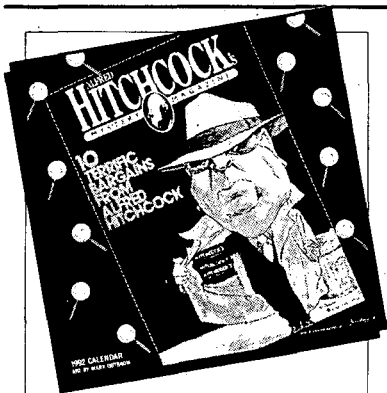
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(1) \$54.75	(2) \$54.75	(3) \$54.75	(4) \$54.75	(5) \$54.75
(6) \$54.75	(7) \$54.75	(8) \$54.75	(9) \$54.75	(10) \$54.75
(11) \$54.75	(12) \$54.75	(13) \$54.75	(14) \$54.75	(15) \$54.75
(16) \$58.40	(17) \$62.05	(18) \$65.70	(19) \$69.35	(20) \$73.00
(21) \$76.65	(22) \$80.30	(23) \$83.95	(24) \$87.60	(25) \$91.25
(26) \$94.90	(27) \$98.55	(28) \$102.20	(29) \$105.85	(30) \$109.50

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. Mark Holy, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017, 7 words. Zip codes are not counted. Phone # 2 words. Symbols used as keys are charged for City or State count as 1 word each. Garden City, New York, 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A., 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words). Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.

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▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

The secret behind Regent Sheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife.

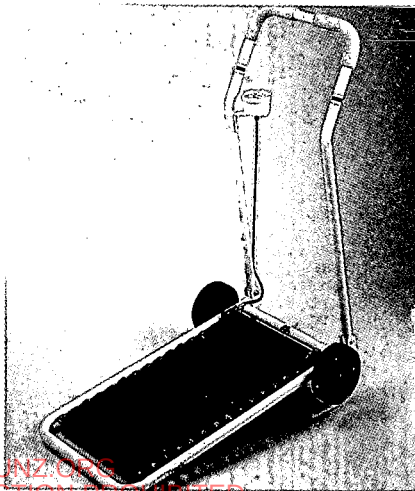
\$129.98 (\$7.00) #A1933.



▼ FOLDAWAY EXERTRACK™

Staying in shape is vital for our health and well being with today's lifestyle. Getting to the gym may not always be easy in our busy lives. We have just the answer for all you people on the go or just for the ones who enjoy to get fit at home. That's why the Foldaway Exertrack is the perfect way to exercise. This personal treadmill has a speedometer/odometer to monitor speed and progress. It measures 38"x21"x3" and features a safe rubber track and an adjustable handlebar that faces forward or backward for running and walking comfort. No electrical connections or motors needed. Exercise has never been simpler. Order one today and get on the right track with the Exertrack. Folds away for easy storage, lightweight and compact. At a great price!

\$131.98 (\$15.00) #A1977



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▼ EVERYTHING BAG

People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors, **\$24.98** (\$4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.

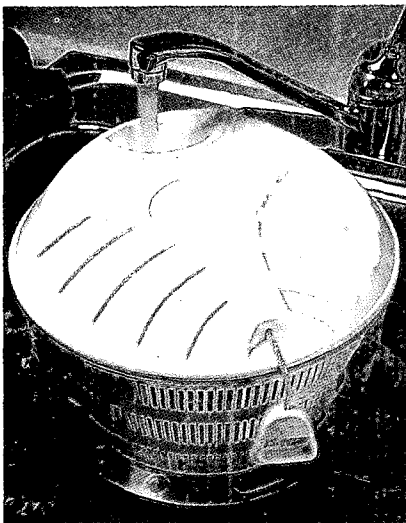


▼ FOOD FOR WOOD

Most of the convenience waxes you buy actually dry out wood instead of nourishing it. What's the alternative? Our choice is Williamsville Wax. It is made of beeswax and lemon oil, heat-blended with other natural oils. It can be used on any type of wood, any type of finish, on paneling or kitchen cabinets as well as fine furniture. Williamsville Wax is super for restoring neglected or mistreated wood. Two 8-oz. bottles cost **\$13.98** (\$3.25) #A14312.



▼ SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY



The Jet Spin Washer/Dryer for salad greens and vegetables, does a better job with less effort than any other method of preparation. As the stream of water hits the spinning inner basket, it bursts into spray, giving the contents a good drenching before being carried off by centrifugal action. Flywheel action keeps basket spinning with only a few gentle tugs. Spray wash coaxes dirt and grit from innermost lettuce wrinkles. Turn off the faucet and with a few more tugs the remaining water spins away, leaving you with crisp clean salad greens, so dry they are positively perky. Also works for fruits and vegetables. The Jet Salad Washer/Dryer is self-draining, splashfree. **\$19.98** (\$4.50) #A1520.

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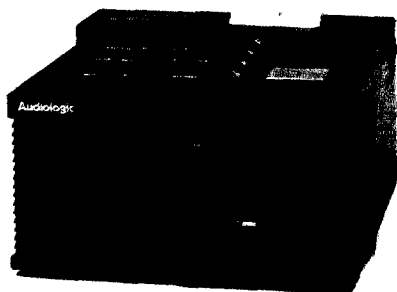
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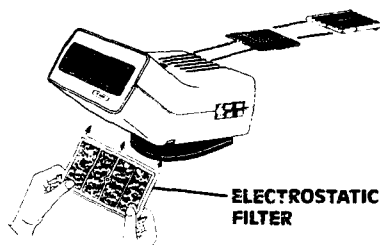
▼ BREATHE EASIER WITH THE AIR PROCESSOR

Clean air is vital to overall good health and general well-being and there is growing concern about the quality of the air around us. Amcor's Air Processor is uniquely designed to remove indoor air pollution and improve air quality. This compact unit has a high voltage generator that produces negatively charged ions that clean the air of cigarette/cigar smoke, dust, pollen, fungal and bacterial particles as well as a host of other allergy stimuli. The Air Processor also features a blower for air circulation and a unique filter that is permanent and washable. Includes a free ionoscope that detects the negative ions emitted from the ion generator and proves that it is functioning. Very quiet so it is perfect for any room in your house. UL listed. **\$99.98** (\$6.50) #A2002.

▼ SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER



Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audiologic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! **\$89.98** (\$5.50) #A2000.



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